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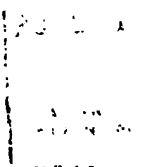

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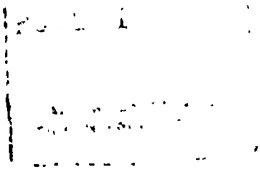

A bend in the path showed Désirée in the moonlight.... waiting.

THE WOMAN HE DESIRED

BY

LOUISE GERARD
AUTHOR OF "A SON OF THE SAHARA"

NEW YORK
THE MACAULAY COMPANY

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To My Friend
DOROTHEA THORNTON CLARKE
WITHOUT WHOSE HELP
AND CONSTANT ENCOURAGEMENT
NEITHER THIS NOR ANY OF MY BOOKS
WOULD HAVE BEEN WRITTEN

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THE WOMAN HE DESIRED

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PART ONE

CHAPTER I

MOTHER AND SON

When John Wilson was a little boy his mother used to tell him fairy tales. She was a young widow who had to work hard for a living and she had not much time for entertaining her small son.

The story John loved best was about a princess. Being a fairy princess, of course she had golden hair, blue eyes, skin like alabaster, and hands no bigger than rose-leaves. She lived all alone in a ruined castle beset with dragons, and of course an ogre wanted to marry her—a dreadful creature like a toad, with a black face and long yellow teeth. The poor little princess spent most of her days in weeping because of the dragons and the ogre. Then he, John Wilson, aged five, came along, and in some marvelous manner rescued her.

And they married and lived happily ever after. But they did not live in the mean little house in a back street where John and his mother lived, with a lodger occupying the front sitting-room and bedroom. Their home was the ruined castle in the mountains, miles away from any city. They had a beautiful garden where lovely trees

and flowers grew, and they kept fowls and ducks and cows, all things that John loved, and that came into his life very seldom.

"When I'm a man I shall *really* marry a princess," he said one day at the conclusion of this favorite story.

His mother laughed sadly, for princesses and her boy were far asunder.

The little boy carried the princess about in his heart. She went to school with him—the board school—and even there there were boys who twitted him because of his poverty, and the two neat, round patches that were almost invariably in the seat of his trousers; "the sun and moon" they called them. For John was a sturdy youngster, who wore out his clothes quickly—so quickly that his mother sat up dressmaking until after midnight to buy more trousers. Yet she was glad her boy was strong, even if it meant extra hard work for her. Health was all she could give him for a start in life, and so that he should have it, she half starved herself to feed her cub.

When the boys twitted John about the "sun and moon," and because he had no pennies with which to buy sweets and marbles, he refused to cry. Instead, he retired to some quiet corner and told the princess. And she would come out of his heart and sit beside him—a tiny, fragile, gentle thing, quite different from any of the little girls who came into John's life—and touch him with rose-leaf hands.

"Never mind, John, if you are poor, I love you," she would whisper.

And the little boy was quite happy again.

When John was five the princess was four, and when he was eight she was seven. By that time, when his confrères bullied him, it was not necessary to trouble the

princess about the matter. He had learnt to retaliate with his fists.

Nevertheless he still talked to her, and she talked to him, but on other matters.

One winter's afternoon, as he was coming home from school in the dusk, scuffling his feet in the gutter, picking up an odd stone here and there as he went along, she said:

"What are you picking up all those dirty stones for, John?"

"They're to keep the wolf from the door, Princess," he answered promptly.

Then he had a long talk with her about the wolf. He had just heard that the lodger was kept for that purpose. The lodger was a thin, little, old woman, in John's estimation not able to cope with the task assigned to her; so he was going back with his pocket filled with stones to drive the ravening beast away. Hand in hand, in the twilight, John and the princess, their hearts in their mouths, crept down the long dark entry that led to the back door, the little boy ready to push his companion behind him should the wolf appear. But the back door was reached in safety. Then John quickly put the princess back into his heart; she was never allowed out nowadays when people were about, because once or twice the mere world had laughed at her.

When John was twelve the princess was eleven. Then he left school and went into an iron foundry. The image of the princess grew fainter. But sometimes when he was indulging in strong language she would come and look at him with soft, reproachful eyes, and put her tiny hands to her ears, and the rough youth would stop, and try to mold himself on lines his ideal would approve.

When John was twenty-two the princess was eighteen, and the faint shadow of her came between him and the temptations that beset a healthy young man who has just started to make money.

Then, although Wilson's years increased, the age of the princess remained stationary. But she was a dream maiden now, a high-born, honorable, dainty little thing, possessed of every womanly charm and virtue—an ideal —and in a hot, hard hunt for wealth the man almost forgot about her.

Yet sometimes, when he rested for a moment from the heated scramble, she would come and sit beside him. And he would smile at her sadly.

For John Wilson knew now that if he married at all it would not be a princess. Nevertheless, the lovely fairy companion of his boyhood successfully came between him and all other women.

CHAPTER II

THE TRIPLE ALLIANCE

A lamp was burning on a table in a third-rate New York boarding-house. It showed a tawdry room, smelling of cigarette smoke and patchouli. There was a dirty cretonne curtain stretched across one corner. The iron rod on which it hung had slipped out of position, exposing several showy evening dresses.

On a dishevelled bed a woman lay—a common-looking creature. Once her hair had been bleached a bright metallic yellow; now, from the scalp upwards, for a couple of inches, it was a dull brown. Her mouth was open, displaying an array of gold-mounted teeth. Her bold eyes were glazed. In her day she had been handsome in a large, coarse way; but now her day was done.

By the bed two men stood. They were both tall, slim, handsome, and elegant, unmistakably well bred. The younger was dark, the elder gray-haired.

"Well, *mon père,* so that's the end of Cissy," the former said presently. "And a damned long time she was dying."

"And the end of 'The Triple Alliance' too," his father remarked.

Turning from the bed, with a casual air Eugene de Gilbert lighted a cigarette.

"I'm not so sure of that," he said in response to his father's remark.

"Not so sure?" the Count de Gilbert repeated. "What

do you mean? What have you got in your head now, Eugene?" he questioned in a tone of feverish anxiety.

"Several schemes to come between me and my pet aversion—work, *mon cher.*"

"Come to the point, can't you?" his father said irritably.

"Well, then, what's to prevent us from using Désirée? Let her keep us afloat until such time as we can put our hands on 'The Necklace of Tears,' or as long as we need her, should the necklace prove a fraud."

"Using Désirée!" the Count echoed.

"Yes, Désirée, my cousin, your niece and ward. Désirée, Countess de Mailly," Eugene said, emphasizing each word, as if pleased at the sensation his suggestion had caused, and anxious to be still more impressive.

His father stared at him with awe and admiration.

"The very thing, Eugene!" he cried, excitedly. "The very thing! You must go and fetch her at once."

Eugene flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"Not me," he replied. "If I set a foot in France I shall have to fight for my country—a damned uncomfortable job. You, *mon père,* you must fetch her."

He paused and smiled wickedly.

"'The Triple Alliance' is dead. Long live 'The Triple Alliance'!" he finished, his voice raised to a shout.

"Be quiet, you fool," his father said hastily, giving a nervous glance round. "Every police bureau in the States knows that name. And don't you mention it to Désirée unless you want to get us both imprisoned for the rest of our lives."

"*Mon cher,* your business in life is not to lecture me, your dutiful son, whose one aim and object is to rectify the lack of cash brought about by his father's wild and extravagant youth. Your business is to go to France

and fetch Désirée. There's no time to waste. The funds are low. Now I'm off to the shipping office to book your passage, and then to see about getting Cissy under the daisies as cheaply as possible."

Whistling gayly, Eugene de Gilbert went from the room, leaving his father staring at the woman who had been dead barely half an hour.

CHAPTER III

DÉSIRÉE DE MAILLY

Over New York the clocks were striking two—two in the morning, when the sky-scrapers stood black against a star-strewn sky, and revelers were returning from festivities. A little party of three had just come back from a ball at a fashionable hotel to the second-rate lodging-house where they were staying. One of the three went straight up to the shabby back sitting-room, and sat there awaiting the arrival of the other two.

There was no light in the room, but a ray of the moon fell into it, showing a girl in a cheap white silk evening frock, who was sitting with her hands clasped listlessly on her knee, her eyes downcast.

The door opening made her turn her head in that direction.

Two men entered.

"Hello, here's Désirée all alone in the dark," the younger remarked.

The older man switched on the light.

"Don't start teasing your cousin," he said with a touch of impatience.

The flare showed a young girl, slender and fragile, with a thin, transparent face, misty blue eyes, and a wealth of golden hair coiled like a crown on the top of her small head; a nervous, high-strung child; as if transfixed, she turned her eyes towards the two men, a frightened ex-

pression in them, as if dreading what they might do next. Judging only by her face she looked about fifteen, but the curves of her drooping figure and the fact that her hair was up indicated that she must be older than that. In spite of her thinness and the air of tragedy that lurked about her she was exceedingly pretty, and with happiness, care, and good feeding she would have been a remarkably beautiful girl.

Crossing to her side, Eugene drew out a bracelet, a handsome piece of jewelry—a band of rubies and diamonds, worth at least £500.

"*Ma chérie,* would you like to try on this pretty bracelet?" he asked.

"Put it away, Eugene, at once," the old Count said, a tremor in his voice.

"Oh, Désirée doesn't understand," Eugene said, laughing.

Nevertheless he put the bracelet into his pocket. Then he turned towards a table where whisky and soda and sandwiches stood.

"It's a damned good thing that Cissy is dead," he went on as he helped himself to a drink, "for now it's a case of a half, not a third, and I don't have to be forever propitiating her. Good luck to you, Désirée," he finished, holding the glass towards the girl. "And may your heritage prove all your uncle thinks it."

"Do be quiet," the Count said. "A curse on you and your ill-timed jokes."

"A curse on me, eh, as well as on 'The Necklace of Tears,'" Eugene commented, by no means perturbed. "Beware, *mon père,* curses come home to roost."

With a snarl at his son the Count de Gilbert turned

towards the table, with trembling hands pouring out a glass of whisky and soda.

"Won't you have a sandwich, Désirée?" he asked.

"No, thank you, uncle."

"Désirée is never hungry," Eugene put in. "Désirée never wants anything nowadays except to get back to France and away from us. We'll take you back, little cousin, when you're twenty-one, never fear. We're going to be present at your birthday festivities. We wouldn't miss them for worlds, would we, *mon père?*"

The old Count scowled and fidgeted, and Eugene's wicked smile deepened. Then he crossed to the girl's side and leaned over her, his handsome face expressing cruelty.

"Give me a kiss, Désirée."

She moved her head away quickly.

"I don't like being kissed," she said.

"But I like kissing you," he replied. "And I know another who would like to—Manuel Bassino, our new millionaire friend from Brazil. Why did you run away from him just now? Why didn't you wait and say good-by when he had so kindly given us a lift in his motor? Millionaires don't grow on every tree. You should encourage him, not treat him in that offhand manner. Think how nice it would be for you—and us—if you were the wife of a millionaire."

There was no reply from Désirée, but the expression on her face indicated helpless terror—the look of one caught in a trap with no means at hand for escape.

CHAPTER IV

MANUEL BASSINO

A few days later the Count de Gilbert brought a friend back to dinner. The visitor, who was a man of about forty, was far from prepossessing, and to add to the disadvantages nature had bestowed on him, years of dissipation had left their mark. His hair was black, his complexion swarthy, and undoubtedly there was a goodly modicum of negro blood in him. His clothes were flashy, and diamonds glittered in his shirt front and on his short, fat fingers.

Between the courses he picked his teeth the while fastening his vulgar and covetous gaze on the young girl seated next to him. But Désirée ignored him entirely, except when he leaned so close to her that his hot, rank breath fanned her cheek; then she shivered and drew away.

Once the meal was over she got up and seated herself as far away from him as possible. But she did not escape for long. Within a few minutes he was at her side again, breathing heavily, talking in a thick, guttural voice with a rasping American accent.

"In Rio I've got a palace, Countess," he said boastfully, as he puffed cigar smoke into her face, "half a dozen automobiles, and more servants than I can reckon up just now. My wife could be a queen out there, blazing with diamonds. She could have any darned thing she

liked to ask for. I've got six hundred thousand dollars a year. And I guess that's not a bad income as incomes go."

He paused and laid a hot hand on the girl's thin one. "*You* could be that queen if you liked to be a bit pleasant to me," he finished with heavy emphasis.

His touch sent a shudder through her. Quickly she drew her hand away. Without a word she rose and made towards the door, almost falling over a chair in her haste to escape.

Manuel Bassino watched her go, chagrin and desire on his coarse face.

"Your niece don't encourage me nearly so much as you do, Count," he remarked the moment the door closed behind her.

"Désirée is not used to the world and its ways," was the even response. "She had never been a day away from her home until I brought her to America. And she is not accustomed to men either."

"That innocent baby face of hers has set me on fire," Bassino answered thickly. "I'm fed up on actresses and the like. And I've got the pick of all that come to Rio. I'm just crazy for that girl. So crazy that I'd marry her in spite of everything. Though I know you'd let me have her without that, if the check was big enough."

Eugene laughed, but his father bristled fiercely.

"My niece is not for sale," he said haughtily.

"Don't put on any airs for my benefit," Bassino answered coolly.

"Her family is one of the oldest in France," the Count began.

"I know all about the family," Bassino interrupted. "She's a thoroughbred all right. A bit of good old blue

blood won't do my family any harm. That's why I mean to marry her. But she don't seem to have the fancy for me that I've got for her," he finished, a trifle despondently.

"A French girl of the Countess de Mailly's position has to marry the man her guardian chooses, not according to her own fancy," the Count commented.

Bassino's eyes rested for a moment on Désirée's uncle.

"Would twenty-five thousand dollars square the deal?"

"I shall not allow my niece to marry before she's twenty-one."

Here Eugene put in a word or two in French, a language the Brazilian did not understand.

"Let him have her," he said quickly. "With her married to him we have a regular source of income, and we can still use her judiciously, if necessary."

A stubborn look appeared on his father's face.

"I've waited nearly twenty years for 'The Necklace of Tears,'" he answered in the same language. "It comes to Désirée when she's twenty-one. There's no mistake about that. I've seen the terms of her grandfather's will. In fifteen months, Eugene, the necklace will be ours. And it's worth at least five million francs."

The younger man shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said, "you know my opinion of the old Count de Mailly and the necklace."

The Count de Gilbert's verdict about waiting until Désirée was twenty-one made Bassino sit up suddenly.

"Twenty-one!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean to say I've got to wait a whole year and more?"

When the Count had finished talking to his son, he turned his attention very deliberately once more to Désirée's suitor.

"I refuse to allow her to be married until she is of age."

"Look here," Bassino said in an anxious manner, "I'll give you a check for fifty thousand dollars if I can marry her at once."

"You've heard my terms, Mr. Bassino. If you don't like them——"

The Count shrugged his shoulders.

"The cash in hand, *mon père,* the cash in hand," Eugene spluttered, *sotto voce,* in French. "For heaven's sake don't let that slip for a shadowy 'Necklace of Tears.' As far as America is concerned our day is about done. Now that the war is over we must trek to Europe, where 'The Triple Alliance' is not so well known. And the trek will cost money."

The elder Gilbert turned again to the Brazilian.

"Of course, if during the interval a more desirable *parti* presents himself, naturally nothing is settled."

Bassino's swarthy face suddenly lost its look of assurance and aggression.

"If I give you a check for fifty thousand dollars, now, this minute, can I have the girl when she's twenty-one?" he asked, his voice thick with anxiety.

"Well, of course, that is rather different," the old Count answered.

Bassino's impatience increasing, he immediately drew out a check-book and a fountain pen. Going to the table, he wrote out a check for the amount and handed it to Désirée's guardian.

The Count de Gilbert took it, folded it carefully, and put it into his waistcoat pocket.

Bassino watched him do it. Then he said:

"Now that I'm the Countess Désirée's suitor I can come here when I like and as often as I like? And when I put

the question, and she gives me the go-by, I suppose all I've got to do is to lay the matter before you and that settles it?"

"I think you have grasped the idea exactly," Eugene replied.

"But what innocence, what beauty, what a feast for any man," Bassino exclaimed, the fervor of his passion punctuating each word.

In anticipation of the treat in store for him, he was indeed a happy man.

CHAPTER V

UNWELCOME GIFTS

By the window of the dingy sitting-room Désirée sat knitting, a drooping, graceful figure in a shabby serge frock, with the sun glinting on her crown of golden hair. And the little hands that worked away so industriously were not much bigger than those of John Wilson's fairy princess.

In a deep chair close by her cousin lolled. Although it was nearly midday, he was still in pyjamas and slippers. He was breaking his fast in a continental manner. A cup of black coffee, a liqueur, and a box of cigarettes stood on the table beside him.

The sound of a heavy footstep on the stairs caused a frightened look to pass over the girl's face.

"Eugene, there's Mr. Bassino," she said, a note of terror in her voice. "He's been here every day this week. Please, please, don't go and leave me alone with him," she pleaded imploringly.

Her cousin laughed.

"What's wrong with Bassino?" he asked. "He's not going to eat you."

"I don't like him."

"Well, you must be civil to your uncle's friends."

A moment later the door opened. The Brazilian entered. In one hand he carried a huge bouquet of parma violets, and tucked under his arm was an enormous box of chocolates.

Nodding to Eugene, he crossed to the girl's side.

"I know you like flowers, Countess, so I brought you some," he said, laying the bouquet on her knee. "You've only got to say the word and I'll send a cartload round every day. And I brought you some chocolates," he continued, thrusting the box on her. "All girls like them."

"Thank you; I'd rather not have anything," she said in a low voice.

"Nonsense," her cousin put in sharply. "If your uncle says Mr. Bassino may bring you presents that settles it."

Désirée's hands started to tremble. The flowers remained ignored on her knee. The great box of chocolates Bassino laid on a little table beside her, for she had made no attempt to take them.

For a moment or two he watched her, a look of longing on his coarse face; then he turned to her cousin.

For a few minutes the two men talked together; then Eugene got up and went from the room.

Although Désirée did not raise her eyes, she heard him go, and she knitted more industriously than ever, as if to bring something between herself and Bassino.

With greedy eyes he devoured her. At each of his movements she started. To his remarks she gave low, trembling replies.

Presently he drew his chair close to her side.

She got up quickly, as if to go from the room. But he caught her arm and pulled her down again.

"No, Countess," he said thickly. "You always run away when I come."

"I—I don't want to stay," she said helplessly, like a little child at bay.

"You've got to now," he said, still keeping a detaining hand on her arm.

"Are you making that tie for me?" he inquired, looking at the knitting she held clutched tight in desperate little hands.

"It's a Christmas present for my uncle," she said in a frightened voice.

"What would you like me to get *you* for a Christmas present?" he asked.

"Nothing, thank you."

"Come," he said affectionately, his sensual face close to her innocent one, his hot breath fanning her thin cheek, "all girls like pretty things. What would you like? I'm a millionaire. And I guess not many have come into your life, Countess."

"I don't want anything, thank you," she persisted with trembling politeness.

"You mustn't think it's going to break me to get a few things for you," he continued with a cajoling air. "What about a rope of pearls? They'd suit you fine. And half a dozen pretty frocks? Real good ones, that cost a mint of money, not the cheap things you always wear."

For a moment the child turned her face towards him, a look of hope on it.

"Then you don't know that—that——"

She broke off, flushing painfully.

"I know all right," he responded. "But that don't make any difference. You're such a little beauty, Désirée."

The free use of her name brought a touch of hauteur to the girl's sensitive face. Before she had time to say anything he had taken one of her hands. She tried to draw it away, but he held it in a vise-like grip.

"Your uncle's fixed up that you're to marry me," he went on.

"No, no!" she gasped, trying to get away.

He slipped an arm round her, drawing her close to his side.

"Girls who say 'No' must be kissed into saying 'Yes,'" he said, his voice hoarse with passion.

She struggled frantically, giving little gasping screams. But she was helpless against his strength. He drew her closer, crushing his lips on hers.

And then she struggled no longer. She collapsed in his arms, and lay there, limp and white, with closed eyes.

For a moment he surveyed her, annoyance and amusement in his gaze.

"*Sacré,*" he said, "my little thoroughbred has fainted."

Then he laid her on a couch and rang the bell.

CHAPTER VI

UNCLE AND NIECE

In a dejected attitude Désirée was sitting on the bed in a stuffy little room on the top floor of the lodging-house. In her simple night-gown, and with a thick plait of golden hair hanging on either side of her small, tear-stained face, she looked a child—a child who for a punishment had been sent to bed.

This idea was enhanced by the fact of her uncle standing severe and angry-looking at her side.

"Uncle, I don't want to marry Mr. Bassino. I don't, really," a helpless little voice said.

"Don't be so foolish, Désirée. Think how rich you'll be."

"I don't want to be rich."

"Nonsense. You've no *dot* worth talking about. Mr. Bassino is an excellent *parti,* better than I'd hoped to get for you. You ought to be grateful, not cry about it. Besides, you're not going to be married until you're twenty-one. You'll have plenty of time to get used to the idea."

"I shall never get used to the idea. I shall always hate him."

"Nonsense," her uncle said again.

"There's 'The Necklace of Tears.' That's mine when I'm twenty-one. Can't I sell that instead of having to marry Mr. Bassino?" she asked in a desperate voice.

"'The Necklace of Tears'?" her uncle repeated.

He tried to make his tone contemptuous when the girl mentioned her heritage. But he could not. In spite of his efforts, when he spoke of the necklace a covetous note crept into his voice.

"What's that worth?" he went on. "Perhaps thirty thousand francs. That's nothing nowadays."

"I'll work for you. I'll do anything rather than marry Mr. Bassino. Oh, uncle, don't make me," she pleaded, the tears starting to fall again.

"Work! What sort of work could you do?" he asked impatiently.

At his words Désirée's slim hands clasped one another in an agony of helplessness. They certainly did not look fit for work.

"If I say you are to marry Mr. Bassino, that's enough," her uncle went on in a sharp tone. "So stop crying, and don't let me have any more of this foolishness."

Angrily he turned from her and left the room, switching off the electric light behind him.

For a moment or two Désirée did not move, transfixed by the fate that had overtaken her.

Then she dropped on her knees by the bedside.

"O God, in this great, dark world is there no one who will save me?" she moaned.

The prayer of a frantic, helpless child left to the mercy of a couple of scoundrels!

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

JOHN WILSON

In a large house on the outskirts of an English manufacturing town a Christmas party was in full swing. There were fully a hundred people present. Mrs. Green's parties were always popular; she had a liking for pretty young girls, she loved match-making, and she generally managed to get plenty of eligible men.

At that moment she was sitting in what she was pleased to call the winter garden of her ostentatious home. She was a woman well over fifty, plump and painted. Her hair had been tinted a bright auburn, and added to considerably. She was dressed in a most youthful manner, in the height of fashion, and was smothered with showy and expensive jewelry.

The man with her looked somewhat like a prize-fighter in evening dress. He was of medium height, with a width of shoulder that made him appear short and heavy, his plain, strong face clean-shaven and inclined to redness. His close-cropped hair was dark. His brown eyes were shrewd and kindly—the eyes of a man who knows the world and the measure of most of the people in it. His hands were large and powerful and chipped by machinery. Yet they were not clumsy, for he handled his companion's delicate fan with skill and care.

They were opposite types of the *nouveau riche*. The woman was a blatant display of wealth, vulgar and lavish, as if her one idea were to make the world gape at the amount of money she had at her command.

But there was nothing about the man to suggest that he had more than an average income. The studs in his shirt front were of plain gold, and a corded black silk ribbon took the place of a watch chain.

Although John Wilson had striven hard to attain money, and now possessed an income of over £10,000 a year, he did not love wealth for its own sake, or use it merely to make a display. He liked it because it brought within his reach what he had always hankered after, and what, until five or six years ago, had been denied him—the best. He had a taste for old things—old china, old furniture, old houses, old wine, and old families—probably begotten of being so new himself.

The few members of what he in his own mind called "pedigree stock" who had crossed his path had proved disappointing. There were one or two broken-down old families in the town who mingled with the rich manufacturers—families, with several daughters, who he knew encouraged him because of his money. But the daughters in no way resembled the princess of his dreams. Of the choice before him—the daughters of self-made men and the daughters of the poor off-shoots of well-connected people—he preferred the former; for the latter seemed to have the bad points of both classes and the good ones of neither.

However, he was not thinking of these matters at that moment. In a half-smiling, tolerant, quizzical manner he was listening to his hostess.

"Well, Mr. Wilson," she was saying, "it's Christmas again, and you're still not married."

"If I remember rightly, Mrs. Green, every Christmas Eve for the last seven years you've made the same remark to me."

"And I shall go on making it. Every man ought to do his bit nowadays."

He smiled, but he made no comment.

"You're well enough off, so you can't make that excuse now," she continued in a lecturing manner. "You're old enough—you're thirty-three—so that's another reason you can't put forward any longer. There are twenty girls here this evening who would marry you if you asked them. And then—there's the 'man shortage.'"

"The girl I'd like isn't here to-night," he said, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Who's she?" his hostess asked quickly, with an inquisitive air.

"The right one."

"Get along with you," she said, laughing. "You're always finding some excuse for shirking your duty. I believe the real truth is you don't care tuppence for women."

Wilson had no immediate reply.

At that moment, vaguely before him was the little phantom friend of his boyhood, the fairy princess, fragile, lovely, and high-born, quite different from the merry, laughing, pretty girls around him.

"Perhaps I'm not a family man," he suggested.

"Every man says that until he has a family."

Mrs. Green paused, regarding her guest thoughtfully.

"I'll tell you what's the matter with you, Mr. Wilson. You stick too close to business."

He laughed good humoredly.

"If I hadn't stuck to business where should I have been?" he asked.

She sighed, and a wistful look passed over her painted face.

"There's such a thing as too much money for people like you and me, who were brought up in a homely way. Why don't you take a real holiday, and see what the world's made of? I doubt if you've ever put a foot outside of England."

"I once spent a week in Paris."

"On business, I'll bet," she said quickly.

"Guilty," he replied, smiling.

"Oh, business! You men never think of anything else. I'm fed up with it," she said impatiently.

Then she turned towards him with a motherly air.

"Look here," she said suddenly, "I hate to see you going the way of Mr. Green. He's not happy unless he's got the din of the factory in his ears. I'm going to the south of France for three months—to Nice. Why don't you go there for a few weeks and see how other people live? It would do you a world of good—get you out of the groove."

With shrewd, kindly eyes Wilson surveyed his hostess.

"I believe you've got the welfare of the world at heart, although you make such a pose of frivolity," he remarked. "And I'll think about your suggestion."

Then the band struck up, and, excusing himself, Wilson went off in search of his next partner.

CHAPTER II

THE ENCOUNTER

One platform of the Gare de Lyons in Paris was crowded with people, French and English, going south to escape the winter, or seeing friends off.

Outside a Pullman carriage Eugene de Gilbert stood, talking to some one inside, an acquaintance he had made during the last week, of a type he occasionally picked up —a middle-aged woman, obviously wealthy, and without male belongings.

Had anyone suggested to Mrs. Green that Eugene de Gilbert had deliberately scraped acquaintance with her she would have been most indignant.

For the last fortnight she had been staying at one of the best hotels in Paris, a place where royalty could often be seen, where a crowd of titled people went, people she knew by name and sight through seeing their photographs and reading about them in the many fashion and society journals to which she subscribed.

On the fringe she had watched them enviously—a world of well-bred, titled people that she knew she could never enter.

One afternoon, as she sat in the palm court, overlooked by waiters in spite of her repeated calls for tea, an elegant and handsome young man had descended from that giddy sphere. He had seized one of the many waiters, brought him to Mrs. Green's table, taken him to task for neglect-

ing the lady, talked in a friendly manner to her until her tea came, and then with a bow and a smile he had gone back to his own world. And the next minute he was laughing and talking with dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, and a crowd of foreign titles.

At lunch the next day he had given her a bow and a pleasant smile.

That night there had been a *dîner dansant.* He had come and asked her if he might have the pleasure of a dance.

Flushed and flattered and flustered Mrs. Green had been only too delighted to surrender herself to arms that had embraced duchesses.

"You have the true dancing figure," he had said, as his arm encircled her plump form.

She did not quite know what the "true dancing figure" was, but she was very pleased to think that she had it.

It was evident that the young man was French, although he spoke excellent English in a cultured, well-bred voice. Quite casually he mentioned that his father was a count.

The acquaintance ripened, until Mrs. Green's head was slightly turned by the compliments and flattery of Eugene de Gilbert, always suave of tongue in the presence of the fair sex.

Now, on the seat beside her lay a great sheaf of carnations, this fascinating Monsieur Gilbert's parting gift.

It was years since anyone had given her flowers—out of season, as it were—merely for the sake of giving them, not to celebrate some anniversary.

"How sweet of you to have brought them," she said in an infatuated manner.

"I couldn't let you go without some memento of our

delightful acquaintance," he answered, smiling in a frank, boyish manner.

"I do hope we shan't quite lose sight of one another."

"I'm coming to Nice in about three weeks with my father," he replied, "so I shall look forward to seeing you there."

"I do so want to meet your father."

Eugene's smile turned to a wicked grin, which he lowered his head to hide.

"And he's equally anxious to meet you," he assured her.

The whistle blew. Mrs. Green extended a parting hand. The young man did not shake it, as she expected. He put his lips to it instead, in an old-world, deferential manner.

The train moved out, leaving Eugene standing bare-headed and a trifle disconsolate-looking on the platform. She waved until he was out of sight; then, with a sigh, she subsided into her corner.

When the train was out of the station she drew some letters from her satchel which she had not had time to read sooner.

Among them was one from John Wilson, saying he was taking her advice. He had decided to give himself a fortnight's holiday—the thorough change she had recommended. She could expect him in Nice in about ten days. And he had written for accommodation to the hotel where Mrs. Green had said she would be staying.

CHAPTER III

BASSINO KEEPS HIS PROMISE

Combining business with pleasure, Manuel Bassino sailed from Brazil to Lisbon, timing himself to arrive in the Portuguese capital a fortnight before Désirée's twenty-first birthday. In that city there were men he wanted to see and money matters to attend to. Once they were done with, he would go by rail across Portugal and Spain into France, arriving at Nice, close to which his prospective bride lived, a day or two before her twenty-first birthday.

He would have a special license with him and marry her at once. As soon as possible he would take her back to Brazil, wrest her from the clutch of her uncle and cousin.

The fifty thousand dollars he had paid for her had not lasted *them* very long. It was their look-out if they had squandered it at Monte Carlo soon after reaching Europe. He wasn't going to finance them any longer, once the girl was his. But it was just as well to keep in their good graces until he was sure of her. They had had another ten thousand dollars out of him. Got it by a sharp trick, too—by making out Désirée was ill and needed all sorts of special treatment. He didn't mind footing her bills—was glad of the chance, in fact. But she had been ill so often that he had smelt a rat.

Instead of communicating with Désirée through her

uncle, as he always had done since her return to France, Bassino had sent a prepaid cablegram straight to the girl herself to know how she was, and he had heard that she had never been ill.

On reaching Europe, he found it disorganized and uncomfortable. He had not been abroad since the war. Things did not get done with the promptitude to which he was accustomed in Rio. Nor was being a millionaire quite so unique and all-powerful as it once had been. The war had produced a whole crop of them—so many that they were no longer awe-inspiring.

Bassino fussed and fumed and raged, but, in spite of the commotion he made, the Lisbon deal which he had hoped to complete in a week could not be finished before the end of a fortnight. It was a matter of a million dollars. Although deeply in love, common sense pointed out that the girl could wait, but the money would not.

So he stayed in Lisbon to complete his transactions, in the grip of two passions—his love of gold and his love of Désirée; when money was not uppermost in his mind, brooding on the girl whose beauty had inflamed him, whose innocence had him in thrall.

She was a catch, even for a man like himself with a mint of money; a girl with a title, and young and lovely into the bargain. True, there was a flaw, but even that might be rectified. That old fox, her uncle, had never spent a cent on her. Once they were married he would have the matter seen into. She had cost him a pretty penny, his little thoroughbred, but you can't get a good thing without paying for it, and, so long as he got her, that was all he cared.

Always Bassino was haunted by the feeling that Désirée might slip through his fingers. How she could

he did not know. Everyone was on his side except the girl, and she did not count.

He wished she did count a little more—that she did not so openly show her fear and dislike of him. But she was not used to men. Once they were married it would be all right. Marriage made all the difference. Just falling in love with her had made all the difference to him; he had not looked at another woman since, and was learning to talk and behave like a gentleman. And marriage for her meant endless money—for a girl who hadn't a cent to bless herself with. Yet she was proud, in spite of her frightened baby ways.

Well, he didn't mind her pride, even if it was turned on him. He would be her husband. She would have to swallow that fact before very long. The husband of the Countess de Mailly! Wouldn't Rio stare! There was not a girl in the place to touch her, and she was nothing now to the beauty she would be when properly dressed, and fed, and looked after. Perhaps even cured!

So Bassino's thoughts ran when he got them off money-making.

At the end of a fortnight, his business satisfactorily concluded, he left Lisbon in quest of his bride. He crossed Portugal and Spain, eventually reaching the French border.

There an uncomfortable surprise awaited him. An unexpected railway strike had broken out. There were no trains running.

"I'm a millionaire," he pompously informed a flurried official at the border station. "I don't mind what I pay. So get me a special train."

"You can have every train in the dépôt for all I care," the official replied, "but all the drivers are out on strike."

"Well, then, get me an automobile," Bassino exclaimed, still believing implicitly in the power of money.

"I'll get you a dozen if you like, but there's no petrol to run them with."

Then Bassino started to rage.

He was not the only one raging. The strike had left the Count de Gilbert in Paris, unable to reach his niece on her twenty-first birthday and "take charge of" her heritage, as he had always promised.

It also left John Wilson in Nice, his fortnight's holiday all but expired. But he was not raging. He loved the sunny, fruitful land to which he had come. A few days more there did not worry him. And if things were not settled in a week or two, well, he had his car with him, and the promise of enough petrol to get him back to Paris.

And it found Désirée de Mailly alone in her home, without any relatives with whom to celebrate her coming of age, in sole possession of "The Necklace of Tears," a family heirloom that her uncle had given her to understand was worth only about £1,000, and which he had told his son was worth nearly £200,000!

CHAPTER IV

CHÂTEAU DE MAILLY

Away in the mountains at the back of Nice an old red-roofed château stood, a long, flat building in the last stage of dilapidation. It was three stories high, once pink-washed and painted with an elaborate fresco. Now almost all the plaster had fallen off the walls, revealing rough gray stones beneath. At one end a large square tower stood. On the sea side it was open and edged with marble balustrades—a delightful spot on a hot day. Most of the roof had fallen in. Weeds grew between the mosaic of its floor, and bats found a refuge among the rafters.

In front, along the whole length of the dwelling, a wide terrace ran. Around the balustrades a profusion of roses rioted, and a great spreading loquat-tree shaded one corner.

A dozen French windows led out on to the terrace, their long green shutters mostly broken and askew. Beneath the terrace were cave-like rooms, an expanse of cellars running right under the house. Nearly all the doors were broken, or had disappeared entirely. In the dim depths were old olive oil and wine presses, huge broken vats in which the produce had once been stored, and racks for drying raisins and figs. But spiders and other creeping things reigned supreme there now.

From the terrace hardly a habitable house could be

seen. There were the ruins of half a dozen within a two-mile radius, even more dilapidated than the château itself. It and its crumbling satellites were shut off from the rest of the world by rounded hills and deep valleys, orange, lemon, and olive groves, and dense patches of pine wood. Beyond a wide bowlder-strewn valley, a straight wall of gray mountain rose, like a huge cloud on the horizon. Above it snow-clad peaks towered, white and glittering against the azure sky. The sloping hills around had once been terraced for cultivation, but nothing grew there now except grass and weeds.

There were neglected vineyards, so long untended that the stumpy little bushes were utterly ruined, a mass of useless, twisted brown trailers, just sprouting young green leaves.

In spite of the bright sunshine, the wealth of flowers and fruitful trees, an air of dire poverty brooded over the place. The old stone irrigation tanks which dotted the hillsides spoke of it; they were broken and decayed, filled with slime and water weeds, the homes of a multitude of frogs. The grassy terraces themselves told the same story. Years had passed since they had been dug and hoed and planted, producing the food a hungry world needed so badly. The château itself carried on the pitiful tale; a generation at least had passed since paint or plaster had been laid on it, since shutter or window had been repaired.

Under the shade of the great loquat-tree the remnants of some old iron garden furniture stood, bent and battered, eaten into holes with rust.

On one of the chairs Désirée de Mailly was sitting, a ball of white wool on her knee, a length of knitting in her hands.

By her side an old woman stood, bent and work-worn. From a paper she was reading out some instructions regarding the woolen garment the girl was making.

A sound on the weed-grown gravel drive made the old woman stop suddenly.

"What can that be?" she asked, with the air of one to whom the unexpected rarely happens.

"It sounds like a bicycle," Désirée said.

A few moments later a boy came up the marble steps. In his hand were two telegrams addressed to "Mlle. la Comtesse de Mailly."

The old servant took and opened them. She read the contents through to herself and then dismissed the boy.

"What is it, Juliette?" the girl asked.

"One is a telegram from your fiancé, Monsieur Bassino. He regrets that the railway strike has delayed him. But he will come as soon as he can possibly get here. The other is from your uncle. He and Monsieur Eugene are coming by motor from Paris. I'm sure no one wants to see them," she added sourly.

Désirée did not notice this comment about her uncle and cousin. Other matters filled her mind. Mr. Bassino was coming to claim her, a horror which had been hanging over her for the last fifteen months.

"If only I didn't have to marry him," she wailed.

"You'll be better with him than with them, *ma petite.* At least he loves you," Juliette said, with an air of making the best of a bad job.

"I don't want his love," Désirée said wildly.

"But, Comtesse, you must marry some time, or what will happen to you when I am gone? The flowers will be as fragrant, and the birds will sing as sweetly, in Monsieur Bassino's country as here."

"I want to stay here. I don't want ever to have to go away again," the child cried.

Then her head dropped on the table, and she wept bitterly.

Juliette laid her hand on the thin, bowed shoulders.

"There will be no more dinner of cabbage soup, no more breakfasts of black coffee and dry bread, if you marry this rich monsieur from Brazil. There will be cakes and chocolates all day long. And he will buy you a piano and take you to concerts, and you know you would love that."

The old woman spoke as if to a tiny girl, who, with promises of sweets and toys, must be bribed into doing something she did not want to do.

But Désirée refused to be comforted. She remained with her arms on the rusty iron table, her face hidden in them, weeping helplessly.

"I don't want to be married," she sobbed. "I don't like men. I can't bear Mr. Bassino. I shiver when he touches me. I hate him to kiss me."

Juliette was used to these storms; they always came at the mention of the Comtesse's fiancé. But he was rich, and in her peasant mind that was everything.

"Hush, *ma petite,*" she crooned, the girl's head held lovingly against her chest. "It is far better that you should be married. Every day things here grow dearer and life more hard. And if you ask monsieur your fiancé, he will let old Juliette come with you to his country."

"Do you think he will?" Désirée asked, joy pictured on her face.

"Of course he will, my jewel, if you ask him nicely."

"It might not be so dreadful if you were there," the girl whispered, a trifle consoled.

Juliette said nothing more on the matter. She kissed and petted her charge until the tears were dried and a weary head lay against her shoulder.

"Now," she said briskly, once the storm was over, "Wolf shall take you for a walk, since I'm too busy to go."

Picking up the two telegrams, she shuffled off into the house, leaving Désirée hopelessly resigned to what the future had in store for her.

CHAPTER V

A CHANCE MEETING

Along a narrow mountain road Wilson was walking. He did not quite know why he was walking when he had his motor down in Nice. That afternoon an unusual restlessness had driven him out of his hotel. He had taken the first electric car that came along. When he had reached its destination he had walked on and on, with the strange feeling that he was walking towards his fate. He did not encourage the idea. It was too absurd for a shrewd business man who had made his money in iron.

He had climbed upwards out of a narrow valley, along a hillside dotted with villas set among palms and orange groves. He had passed groups of olives and clumps of lemon and fig-trees, pursuing a narrow white road that crawled along the top of a low mountain.

Behind, a sparkling sapphire framed by tropic trees, was the Mediterranean. Ahead, a great range of snow-clad heights, flanked on either side by lower gray ranges, thrust glittering peaks into an azure sky; a semi-circle of mountains that shut out the everyday world, and left him alone with an expanse of folded hills and hidden valleys.

Here and there quaint, red-tiled dwellings dotted the landscape, set among olives and pines, with an occasional towering cypress. Prickly aloes and pink roses formed the hedgerows. Stumpy vines grew on the terraced hillsides. Every now and again the scene was a mosaic of pink and yellow and white and crimson, the growths of some little flower farm.

The air would be heavy with the scent of pines, roses, and orange blossom. Then a bend in the road would sweep it all away, and the wind would bring the pure, cold breath of the snow-clad mountains.

Wilson strode along briskly, a broad, powerful figure in gray Harris tweed, with a panama hat pulled well on his head. As he proceeded, the road grew more and more deserted. It seemed to him he had the world to himself, a world of peace and beauty, which for years lack of money had placed beyond his reach, until he had almost forgotten he had ever wanted it.

He was just thinking this when a girl appeared around a bend in the road. She was walking slowly, and on a lead she had a gaunt, wolf-like hound, one of the German police dogs that have become so numerous in France since the war.

However, Wilson had no eyes for the dog, only for the girl. She looked about sixteen or seventeen, a slender, fragile child. Beneath a halo of golden hair large misty blue eyes were set, vague and haunting, heavy with tragedy. Her face was thin and ethereal, with a look on it that wrung his heart.

In his early days that look had been on his mother's face, when she had half-starved herself so that her thoughtless cub should not feel the nip of hunger—a look he had removed before he was fourteen, and by the time he was sixteen he had given her comfort; for the last five years of her life, until her death eighteen months ago, luxury.

Wilson had seen such sad, wistful, innocent little faces in pictures of the Annunciation. The girl was a wraith of beauty, fit only for a dream. A dream she had been to the man until that moment; now he saw his ideal embodied.

Hardly knowing what he did, Wilson stopped abruptly. His sudden halt made the dog bark in a savage, menacing manner. "Wolf! Wolf!" a soft voice said, with a note of chiding.

The hound quieted immediately. For a moment the girl turned her face in Wilson's direction—a timid, fleeting movement. Then she passed on, leaving him gaping after her.

He watched her go, wondering what she was doing in the mountains, miles from anywhere.

Much as he desired, he could not follow her and say: "Princess, all my life I've had your image enshrined in my heart. I've loved you wholly and truly, to the exclusion of all other women."

He could only stand and stare after her, held fast by a civilization and common sense that forbade him making any such confession to an unknown person.

At a safe distance he followed her, determined to find out whence she came and scrape acquaintance somehow. He no longer saw the beauty of his surroundings; he saw nothing now but the fragile loveliness of his ideal.

He could visualize every point of her. He knew she was dressed in white—a short-sleeved, low-necked, one-piece garment with a narrow edging of red, with a loose red patent leather belt about her waist. She wore white shoes and stockings, and a little white hat with an upturned brim, split at each side. Through the splits red cherries dangled about her ears.

Life had brought Wilson a fair idea of the price of everything. Although the girl was dressed with taste and style, her clothes were not expensive. There were no bracelets on her slender arms, no rings on her fingers.

Keeping her in sight, he followed slowly, oblivious of everything except the slim figure ahead.

An expected rumble of thunder brought him to his senses. He looked round sharply.

The snow-clad mountains wore a mantle of black clouds. Over the sea others were rising swiftly. There was a long, low sough in the air. The dust started to blow in spirals. The trees moved in the fretful manner that portended a storm.

The one growl of thunder made the girl turn. She started to retrace her steps, the dog straining at the lead.

Wilson halted and awaited her coming.

She had nearly reached him when there was another peal of thunder, much closer at hand.

With a little cry of alarm she halted.

In all his life Wilson had never missed an opportunity, and he had no intention of missing the present one.

Raising his hat, he went forward.

"There's going to be a pretty bad storm," he said. "You'd be wise to seek shelter."

Wilson's voice was his great point: it was firm and pleasant and kind.

When he spoke she started. Then she turned towards him with a helpless gesture.

"Yes, yes," she said quickly. "But where can I go?"

He rejoiced to find she could speak English, since his knowledge of French was most limited.

"I'm so glad you understand English," he said. "I only know about three words of French."

She did not hear him. There was a blinding flash of lightning, followed immediately by a crashing roar of thunder that shook the world.

The sound brought a moan of fear to her lips, and the dog's lead dropped from her hand.

Close by there was a barn.

Seeing that the girl was almost frightened out of her

wits, Wilson seized her arm and drew her into the shelter.

They were scarcely inside when there was an even more terrifying crash, that made her hide her face in her hands as if paralyzed with terror.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he said soothingly. "It'll soon be over."

"It's the noise," she moaned, "the dreadful noise. It always frightens me."

It took more than noise to upset Wilson's nerves, hardened as they were by years spent in an iron foundry, and he blessed the storm that had brought his ideal trembling to his side.

Presently a deep gray shadow swept over the earth. With a rush and roar the rain came, seeming to wash the thunder away, for it retreated rapidly, grumbling and growling in the distance.

"There's nothing more to be afraid of," he said when the noise had abated somewhat.

"It's very stupid of me to be so afraid, but I always am of thunder."

After that there was silence for a time.

Wilson seemed transfixed by the sight of the girl, hardly able to credit that at last she stood before him, the little phantom friend of his boyhood days, the princess of his mother's fairy tale, golden hair, blue eyes, alabaster skin, rose-leaf hands and all. But that princess had not been dressed in a cotton frock and the cheapest of white shoes and stockings. She had always worn a silk dress, a cloak of ermine, a diamond necklace, and a golden crown upon her dainty head.

His silence, or perhaps instinctively aware of the admiration he had for her, alarmed the girl. Presently she called, "Wolf! Wolf!" in an agitated voice, although the animal was standing only a few yards away.

At once the dog was at her side, thrusting its nose into her hand.

"What a splendid beast he is," Wilson remarked.

"I was so afraid he might have deserted me," she said nervously, as she stooped and took the lead.

"It would never do for you to go about in this lonely part without some sort of a guardian."

Her lips opened, as if to make some confession, but they closed again with the words unspoken. Then she said a word to the dog, and made towards the door.

The rain was pouring down in a solid sheet, filling the place with its roar.

"You can't go out," he said quickly.

"I'm not afraid of the rain."

"Perhaps not, but there's no sense in getting wet to the skin. You mustn't think of going until it's over, which won't be long now."

At that moment Wilson's voice was kinder than usual, for his one desire was to put the girl at her ease.

In some degree he succeeded. Although she moved farther away from him, she did not attempt to leave the barn.

Presently he fetched a box from the back of the shed.

"You'd better sit down," he remarked, on placing it beside her. "The rain doesn't seem like stopping yet."

In a shy voice she thanked him. But she did not sit down at once. She felt for the box, as if to make sure it were really there. Then she seated herself.

The dog put its head on her knee, and continued looking up at her with worshipping eyes.

Time passed, but the deluge showed no sign of abating. The girl did not look in Wilson's direction and her silence was unbroken.

He lingered at her side, hoping she would make some

comment. She had not ventured a remark on her own account. The only one she had seemed like making had died unspoken on her lips.

With the idea of finding some clue to her identity, surreptitiously he studied the dog's collar, thinking her name and address might be there. On the tiny brass plate he saw engraved: "Désirée de Mailly, Domaine de Mailly."

Was she Désirée de Mailly, this ideal of his heart, desired by him more than anything that had come into his life?

"I wonder if you are Miss de Mailly?" he inquired presently.

At his question she started.

"Who told you my name?" she asked, a quiver of alarm in her voice.

"I've just read it on Wolf's collar."

There was a further silence.

Wilson had never met a girl so high-strung and nervous. Each time he spoke she started; at his every little movement a wave of fear passed over her face, as if she lived constantly in a state of terror.

He was not usually at a loss for conversation, but having at last before him the wraith of his ideal deprived him of his flow of small talk. But a moment later he pulled himself together, and talked on any and every trivial subject that entered his head. It was uphill work, however, her replies rarely being beyond monosyllables.

As the rain went on it grew rapidly colder.

Anxiously Wilson watched the drooping figure on the box. A woolen costume was the sort of garment for a day like this, not a thin cotton frock.

He saw the slender arms rapidly lose their smoothness, getting red and "goose-fleshy" with cold, and finally a

mottled blue. Yet she never once said how cold it was, or made any complaint, as would have been but natural under the circumstances. She sat and endured in silence, as if endurance were part and parcel of her life; as if her fate were not in her own hands, and she knew nothing she could say or do would alter it.

Wilson felt he must hold her against his heart and warm her, this wan little phantom of his ideal who had lived there for so long.

"I'm afraid you're finding it very cold in this drafty shed," he said presently.

"Yes, yes, perhaps I am. But it doesn't matter," she answered, as if life were such a tragedy that mere personal discomforts were of no consequence.

He felt that in the same soft, sad, resigned, helpless little voice she would have agreed she was miserable, or hungry, or tired, as if she were surprised that anyone should trouble to remark upon these facts when there were such greater troubles in her life.

But when she started to shiver he could stand it no longer. There was something too pathetic in her silent endurance. Without a word he stripped off his coat and wrapped it about her shoulders.

At his touch a stifled gasp of alarm escaped her lips, to be choked back the moment she felt the warmth of his coat around her.

"I can't have you sitting here shivering," he said firmly.

"But won't you be cold?"

"The lack of my coat won't worry me," he answered. "There was a time in my life when I always went about in shirt sleeves."

"It's very kind of you to trouble about me," she said.

Something in her reply told him that kindness rarely came her way.

More than ever he wondered who could find it in their hearts to be anything but gentle and considerate with such a girl.

"I could hardly let you sit and shiver, could I?" he remarked.

To this she had no reply. She drew his coat closer round her. Then she ventured her first comment.

"Wolf doesn't growl at you," she said, as if the fact were rather surprising.

"Why should he? He knows I'm quite harmless."

"He growls at—at most of the men I know," she replied.

The reply made Wilson move a step closer to this child who lived under a cloud of fear, and who talked to him as if she were twelve years old, not the seventeen she looked.

This time his movements did not make her start and tremble. She just sat with her eyes downcast, fondling the dog's head.

Again there was silence—a silence that lasted nearly half an hour—and still the rain showed no sign of abating.

Presently Désirée rose to go, and again Wilson's voice stopped her.

"You mustn't think of going out now," he said.

"But Juliette will be wondering what has happened to me."

"If Juliette has any sense she'll know you must have sheltered."

At his remark she seated herself again. It seemed to Wilson he had only a child to deal with. He had but to speak and she obeyed, as if she were accustomed to other people making up her mind for her.

The shadows started to thicken. Evening came early, brought by the banked clouds overhead.

"It'll be dark in a few minutes," he commented presently.

A willful smile crossed her face, but she said nothing.

Darkness approached rapidly, filling the barn with gloomy shadows. With its coming the rain abated somewhat.

Désirée rose. Taking his coat from her shoulders she held it towards him.

"It's not raining so much now," she said.

This time Wilson did not attempt to stop her. They could not stay there all night.

"Your dress will be wet through in no time," he commented. "You must have my coat to go home in."

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that," she said quickly.

Wilson was used to having his own way. Taking the coat, he wrapped it round her again, with his big hands guiding the slim, bare arms into the sleeves. He felt the girl quiver at his touch, a quiver that thrilled him.

He buttoned the coat and turned up the collar, thus enveloping her in stout tweed from neck to knee. After the first little objection she stood quite still and let him do as he wished, a helpless obedience that puzzled him.

The coat seemed to have brought her some of the strength and power of its owner, as well as the combined odors of heather, tar, sea, and smoke that go with Harris tweed, for she said with an air of decision:

"You can't go all the way back to Nice without your coat."

"How do you know I come from Nice?"

"All English people do," she replied.

"Then you must be from there yourself."

"No, I'm French."

"But you speak English perfectly."

"I was in America for some time."

There was a moment's hesitation.

"Will you come with me?" she went on timidly. "It's only about twenty minutes' walk from here. If you care to stay for dinner, perhaps it will be fine afterwards."

The one thing Wilson wanted was a closer acquaintance. He jumped at the invitation.

"We must start at once," she said. "The rain is holding up a little now, but it may come on as bad as ever in a few minutes."

Désirée said a few words in French to the dog, and it made at once towards the door.

As they left the barn, because the girl looked so weary and drooping, Wilson drew her arm through his, in a firm, careful, decided manner, as though he meant it to stay, and she let it stay there, as if glad of his strength to support her.

Outside it was all but dark; a thick gloom through which great raindrops spattered, quickly soaking his shirt. This did not worry him; his coat was keeping the princess dry. The hound hurried on, straining at the lead.

"Wolf seems in a mighty hurry to get home," he commented.

"He knows we are late and that Juliette will scold him," she answered.

It seemed to the man that he moved in heaven. He did not know he was wet and cold—cold with the bone-piercing chill that often comes on the Mediterranean after sunset. He only knew that his little phantom friend who had lived in his heart so long was there, walking beside him, at last a creature of flesh and blood.

Darkness had fallen when broken iron gates were reached, leading up to what looked to be a narrow, weed-grown lane.

Désirée stooped and loosened the dog, who, after circling round with barks of delight, darted off into the night.

"Why have you let him go just when we need him most?" Wilson asked, wondering how they were going to grope their way along, for he could not see a yard ahead of him.

A small hand was slipped through his arm again.

"We're nearly there now," she replied, "and I can find my way up here with my eyes shut."

Then she laughed, as if at some dreary little joke of her own.

Wilson certainly wondered how she found her way. He knew they passed up a narrow, twisted path lined with trees, for he heard the wind soughing in their tops and the creak of their branches. Now and again he splashed through deep puddles. Occasionally a bough swept his sodden garments, soaking him still further with its weight of moisture.

"We're there now," she said presently.

Wilson could still see only blackness. He stumbled up some stone steps, guided by the hand on his sleeve. Somewhere he heard the dog barking. Around, wooden shutters creaked and groaned and slammed in the wind. He could feel a house looming over him, but there was not a light anywhere in it; only a blank stretch of solid darkness and a garden moaning and whispering eerily.

Presently a glimmer of light percolated through the cracks of the door they were approaching.

A moment later it opened.

An elderly woman stood on the threshold, a tiny lamp smoking in her gnarled hand. She was poorly dressed, in a bunchy black skirt, green with age, a black and white striped cotton bodice, a blue check apron, patched and

well washed, and on her feet were worn black felt slippers.

On seeing Wilson she gave a quick exclamation.

"Juliette," Désirée said quickly as she drew him in, "this gentleman found me all alone in the thunderstorm. He wouldn't let me come back without his coat, so I brought him here for dinner. Light a fire in the spare room, and lend him some of Pierre's clothes until his own are dry. If the rain doesn't stop he'll have to stay all night."

It was all said in French, very rapidly, and with an air of excitement.

Juliette gave Wilson one brief glance. Then, anxiously, she ran her hand over her young mistress. She pointed to Désirée's sodden feet and drenched skirt, all the time talking volubly in a scolding, albeit a caressing manner.

But Désirée's thoughts were all for Wilson.

"Don't bother about me, Juliette," she broke in quickly. "Look after this gentleman."

Then she turned to him.

"Juliette will take you to your room," she said, "and bring you some dry clothes."

She turned again to the servant.

"Take the English gentleman upstairs at once. He's wet through. I'm so afraid he'll get cold."

Lamp in hand, the old woman turned, leading the way along a huge, damp, resounding hall. The feeble light showed the place to be absolutely devoid of furniture and the plaster dropping from its walls.

At the foot of wide marble stairs Wilson paused. Juliette was going upwards, taking with her the one light, leaving her young mistress alone in the black, drafty, whispering hall.

"We can't leave you all alone in the dark," he said, wondering what sort of a place he was in.

Désirée turned her face towards him, smiling wistfully.

"I'm quite used to being alone in the dark," she answered.

The echoes of her voice followed him upstairs. There was a note of tragedy in it that he could not fathom.

Juliette took him along a huge corridor as bare as the hall below, with broken, stained-glass windows, through which the wind whistled and the rain spattered—windows with wide, wooden, worm-eaten seats. Eventually she ushered him into a bedroom.

Lighting a candle standing on the chimney piece, she muttered something in French, and then left him, giving him an opportunity of studying his surroundings.

In the middle of a red-tiled floor a wooden bedstead stood, worm-eaten and aged, with a coat of arms carved on the cracked panels, looking as if any minute it might fall to pieces. An ancient tallboy, too decayed even to be of any value as an antique, leaned drunkenly against one wall, where the paper hung loose—paper that looked as if a generation had passed since it had been put on. On the opposite side a bare deal table stood, with a little jug and basin on it and a tiny square mirror above. The rain leaked in at one corner, making an ever-increasing damp patch on the ceiling; occasionally a drop accumulated, and fell with a heavy splash on the floor. A pane in one of the windows was broken, and stuffed up with sacking. Down the wide chimney the wind howled on to a huge flagged hearth that had two great stones in lieu of a fireplace.

As Wilson surveyed his new quarters, he suddenly remembered he had five thousand francs on his person,

and tales of people decoyed to lonely houses and murdered and robbed—for the setting of the fairy princess suggested a thieves' den more than anything else.

But he put the thought from him. It was an insult to the pure, sad face of his ideal. Also, he recollected that he had accosted the girl, not she him. Then he smiled to himself.

At last he had found the princess! And this, of course, was the ruined castle!

A knock on the door roused him.

Juliette entered with a couple of towels, a jug of hot water, a coarse white shirt, and a pair of blue cotton trousers, gray woolen socks and carpet slippers, and a large basket of logs and chips and pine cones.

Putting the basket down, she placed the hot water and the towels on the deal table, the clothes on the bed.

This accomplished, she turned towards the fireplace.

Between the two stones she laid first a crumpled piece of paper, then a trio of pine cones, almost as large as cocoanuts, then the chips, and, finally, a couple of logs. A match was put to the pile. In a moment it was ablaze, giving light and warmth to the bleak chamber.

"Voilà!" she exclaimed with the air of one who performs miracles.

Getting to her feet, she turned towards Wilson and started talking and gesticulating. Then, suddenly realizing he could understand very little of what she said, with a shrug she left him in peace to change his dripping garments.

CHAPTER VI

JULIETTE

Juliette made her way down another corridor towards a room at the far end. Without any preliminaries she entered. A huge fire was blazing on the wide hearth. Before it, in dressing-gown and slippers, Désirée was sitting, her long hair loose and drying in the warmth.

At her entry the girl looked round.

"Have you made him quite comfortable, that English gentleman?" she asked.

"As comfortable as one can be here, Comtesse."

"He has not guessed," Désirée said. "Don't tell him."

"How can I tell him, *ma petite?* He can't understand a word I say."

"What is he like? His voice is so kind. He feels so nice. He touches one so carefully."

"He is only three or four inches taller than you, my jewel, but very broad and strong. Yes, strong as a bull. He is not handsome like Monsieur Eugene, but his face is good and firm—the face of a man one can trust."

Then she changed the conversation.

"Now what shall we give this English gentleman for dinner? We can't serve only the soup and *purée* of potatoes that was for you," she finished.

"You must make an omelette," Désirée said.

"That means four eggs that I can sell at sixty centimes apiece," was the grumbling reply.

"But hospitality comes first. This gentleman has been very kind to me. And you must open one of those tins of sardines you bought in case my uncle and cousin came for lunch."

"Yes. Ten francs for two tins of sardines—for them!"

There was a world of contempt in the old woman's voice.

"Juliette, you mustn't speak of my uncle and cousin in that manner," Désirée said chidingly.

"I speak of people as I find them," the old woman retorted. "But this dinner, this fête for the English milord. Yes, the soup, the sardines, an omelette, the *purée* of potatoes. So far, so good."

"Then dried figs and walnuts. And oranges, if Pierre will venture out in the rain and gather them. And coffee. Yes, and one of those bottles of wine that came with my grandfather from Paris."

To the last item Juliette agreed heartily.

"Better this English gentleman should drink the wine than—them, for at least he gave his coat to shelter you."

There was no mistaking the weight of dislike for "them" in the old servant's voice.

This time Désirée did not chide her, being too intent on the unexpected guest's dinner.

"And what shall I wear?" she asked. "The white silk I wear when my uncle takes me to parties? No, that would be much too grand. The blue muslin you have just made me. You say it matches my eyes," she finished in a dreary tone.

The remark caused the old woman to place her arms about the girl, her withered lips crooning loving words.

CHAPTER VII

DINNER

A knock on his door roused Wilson.

"Dîner est servi, monsieur," an old voice said.

He glanced at as much as he could see of himself in the blurred mirror. The clothes brought to replace his own were only a peasant's. A coarse white cotton shirt, rough-dry, a pair of stiff blue cotton trousers and felt slippers, were not exactly the garments in which he wanted to face Désirée de Mailly.

He wished to cut as good a figure as possible before her, and he felt that his present attire made him look too much like the better-class artisan his father had been. However, he also knew he could not appear in soaking wet tweeds.

Outside the door he found an old man waiting, who was attired similarly to himself, some of whose clothes Wilson suspected that he himself was wearing.

In Pierre's wake he went downstairs. He was taken through the big, dark hall and shown into a room that was badly lighted—a large place with bare whitewashed walls, a beamed ceiling, and a tiled floor. At one end was an old wooden settee, where a guitar lay; at the other was a cheap deal sideboard. In the middle of an expanse of bare floor was an oak table black with age, and round and about were half a dozen kitchen chairs. The long, low windows were curtainless, with no sign of a cushion

on their broad stone seats. There was not even a rug on the broken tiled floor. On the table and the high chimney-piece were little glass jam-jars full of carnations.

At least there was a good roaring fire of logs, the only thing in the way of comfort the place seemed to possess.

Well in the shadows Désirée stood, looking more desirable than ever in a short-sleeved, frilly frock of cloudy blue.

At Wilson's entrance she did not come forward. As shy as a little child, she did not move, as if waiting for him to come to her side, which he did at once.

To his surprise there was no one in the room but the girl.

"Have the rest of the family had their dinner?" he asked, delighted at the thought of a *tête-à-tête* meal.

"*I* am the family. No one lives here but me and Juliette and Pierre."

"I must look a sight to appear at anyone's dinner table," Wilson began apologetically.

"You—look quite all right," she answered, her face flushing suddenly.

She turned towards the table.

"I can't offer you very much, here in the country," she went on.

"You've no idea what a treat all this is to me," he assured her.

Only one corner of the table was set, with a coarse, checked cloth of green and blue and white, with red lions rampant on the white. The two places were laid with a trio of common white plates, one on the top of the other, and a soup plate on the top of each pile. There were a leaden-looking spoon and fork, a black handled knife, with a glass rest for the two last to repose on between

the courses. By the side of the plates was set a thick, stemmed goblet, and in each was a fringed napkin to match the table-cloth.

Wilson hardly noticed these details. He thought only of the girl living in a depth of poverty altogether out of keeping with her well-bred air.

In spite of her poverty, it was evident both her old servitors adored her. Fussy and trembling, the old man waited on them, hovering round the girl as if he lived for nothing but to serve her.

"Here is the soup, *ma petite,*" he said. "Let me help you."

Everything he put on her plate. He would not even let her reach across for the salt. And she went about her meal in a slow, dainty, hesitant manner that charmed her visitor completely.

"Considering his age, your old servant manages very well," Wilson remarked during the course of the repast, since it very soon became evident that he must start all conversations.

"Pierre was my grandfather's butler. He has served my family for over sixty years. He's seventy-nine now."

Then she said something in French to the old man that brought him hovering round her again, on his lips the *"ma petite"* that Wilson loved. "My little one" seemed the very name for her.

With that sudden realization of facts that had helped Wilson materially in his career he knew that, but for his presence, Désirée de Mailly would have dined off watery soup and mashed potatoes. There would have been no excellent sardines, no perfect omelette, no dessert, no wine that must have come from a connoisseur's cellar, perhaps no coffee.

When the meal was over Pierre cleared the table, leaving them alone to linger over the coffee.

Wilson drew out his cigarette case.

"Do you smoke?" he asked.

"Sometimes Eugene makes me, but I don't like it. It always makes me cough and my tongue sore."

"Perhaps he gives you French cigarettes. You'll find these English ones much milder. Try one."

He held the case towards her.

However, she made no attempt to take one.

"Won't you try mine?" he asked persuasively.

"Will—will you give me one," she faltered, stretching a hand towards him.

He was only too pleased to put one into her hand, for the sake of letting his own touch hers for a moment.

But when she had the cigarette she placed the wrong end between her lips.

However, he was too infatuated to attach any meaning to what she had done. He only saw a child nervous and shy in his company. During dinner, however, it had struck him that she was very shortsighted, but he knew that Frenchwomen would endure anything rather than wear glasses.

"The gold tip goes into your mouth," he said with amusement.

Once the cigarette was alight, it was obvious she was the veriest novice, for she chewed the end and swallowed the smoke.

"Not like that," he said, smiling at her efforts. "Watch me, then you'll see how it's done."

For some reason his words brought tears to her eyes.

"I don't think I'm much good at smoking," she said, her voice trembling as she put the cigarette down.

She was such a child that Wilson thought she suspected him of scolding her because of her unsuccessful efforts.

He glanced towards the settee where the guitar was, and changed the topic.

"Do you play the guitar?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, as if relieved at the turn the conversation had taken.

"Do play something, if you're not tired of entertaining me."

She got up at once and fetched the instrument.

Seating herself again, she played several little tunes, to which he listened enthralled as he studied her delicate profile, her small hands, her crown of golden hair—his fairy princess complete, even to the ruined castle. At that moment he gave no thought to the dragons and the ogre.

Presently she broke into a little laughing, haunting refrain that was the craze of the hour.

"That's the new dance," he remarked when she had finished.

"Yes. I heard it about six weeks ago at Cannes, at a party my uncle took me to."

"Do you know the dance too?"

"Yes, Eugene taught me. He dances splendidly."

Wilson felt jealous of this Eugene who had a way of coming into her talk.

"Who's Eugene?" he asked.

"My cousin."

Wilson got to his feet.

"See if I'm as good a partner as Eugene," he said, going to her side.

"I can't dance and play as well," she answered

"I'll whistle," he said. "It's my one accomplishment in the musical line."

He did not wait for "Yea" or "Nay." Taking the guitar, he placed it on the table. Then he drew the girl to her feet and started the measure.

If he whistled well, he danced even better, and when he took Désirée into his arms he tasted bliss for the first time. She was an excellent partner, no more weight than holding a feather. And he had hard work to keep himself from kissing the little face so close to his own.

"Now we'll have a tango," he said, the moment the quaint little dance was finished, anxious to keep her in his arms.

To his whistling they danced quite half-a-dozen measures, and in the dancing the girl's face lost its tragic look and took on one of fleeting, furtive happiness.

However, she was the first to stop.

"How foolish of us to behave in this childish manner," she said.

"But you're only a child."

"I'm twenty-one to-day."

Wilson was surprised to hear this.

"Why didn't you tell me at dinner it was your birthday, and I'd have drunk to your health and happiness," he said, mentioning the two things his youthful hostess obviously lacked. "Considering you are only just grown-up to-day you can be forgiven any backslidings," he concluded.

"How long have you been grown-up?" she asked shyly.

"Getting on to thirteen years legally. But I put away childish things when I took my first job when I was twelve years old."

"Twelve years old!" she exclaimed. "Did you have to work when you were only twelve?"

Wilson had no intention of deceiving his ideal by pretending to be other than he was.

"I come of quite poor people, Miss de Mailly," he said. "My father died when I was three. Afterwards my mother supported herself and me by dressmaking and letting lodgings. When I was twelve I got a job in an iron foundry. It was not exactly pleasant work, but it was well paid, and that was all I cared about. In those days I earned ten shillings a week. Now I earn £10,000 a year."

He made the last statement with a certain grim satisfaction.

"You talk as if you loved money," she said.

"It's not that exactly. But I appreciate it, as people do who have felt its need. It puts a lot of things within your reach that otherwise you couldn't have."

As he talked he looked at Désirée.

It had put her within his reach—a girl to whom he could not have aspired had he been the thirty shillings a week workman his father was.

"Ten thousand pounds a year! What a lot of money. I've only three thousand francs a year, this house, and 'The Necklace of Tears,'" Désirée remarked presently, as if she had been cogitating on the matter.

"'The Necklace of Tears!' What's that?" he asked.

"I'll show you," she said, turning towards the door.

Wilson watched her go.

He was reckoning out that, at the low rate of exchange, three thousand francs was not much more than £60 a year.

Sixty pounds a year! That was all she had. Sixty

pounds and this ruin of a house—with butter at nineteen francs a pound and meat at seventeen!

The fact made him almost sick with pity.

No wonder she looked as if she were on the verge of starvation, no wonder her home was a ruin.

To get away from his thoughts, he turned towards the fireplace, grateful, indeed, that wood was cheap, for coal was about four hundred francs a ton.

It seemed to him he had found the first of the dragons —poverty—one he could easily slay if she would let him.

A couple of telegrams standing on the high chimney-piece attracted his attention.

They were addressed to "Mlle. la Comtesse de Mailly."

His gaze was fixed on them.

Was she the Countess de Mailly? That lovely, half-starved, helpless child, who was trying to keep body and soul together and two worn-out old servants on £60 a year.

Désirée's entrance roused him.

"Are you the Countess de Mailly?" he asked.

"Yes," she said simply, coming to his side.

He was worked up to such a pitch over the £60 that he almost expected to see her die of starvation before his eyes. However, instead of falling down dead at his feet she held an old leather case towards him.

"This is 'The Necklace of Tears,'" she said.

Wilson was thinking more about her than the necklace —how he could best rectify the straits in which he had found her.

Absently he took the case and opened it.

On white velvet, yellowed with age, lay a diamond necklace, a graded row, each stone perfect, clear and crystal as a tear.

Wilson knew enough of gems to be well aware that a fortune lay within his grip.

"What are you doing with this?" he asked, astounded.

"It's mine."

"But you mustn't keep anything so valuable in this lonely place."

"It only came this morning. My solicitor brought it," she explained. "My uncle was to have been here to take charge of it for me, but there was the railway strike, and he couldn't get away from Paris. I had a telegram to say he's coming by motor.

Wilson handed the case back to its owner, still hardly able to credit what he had seen; it was so out of keeping with her surroundings. A necklace fit for an empress! He doubted if she had any idea of its real value.

But it put quite another light on their relations.

She was no longer a beggar maid, to whom he was only too ready to play the part of King Cophetua. That necklace spelt a fortune. Her people would see that she married some one of her own status, not a self-made business man.

The neat little dream that Wilson had woven since meeting his princess started to fade.

Somewhere in the drafty ruin a clock struck eleven, reminding him that he ought to have gone some hours ago.

"I must be going," he said. "I'd no idea it was so late."

"You can't go back to Nice to-night," she answered quickly. "It's still raining heavily. You must stay here. I've told Juliette to make up the bed."

"But I'm giving you an awful lot of trouble."

"It's very nice having some one here," she said shyly.

Wilson laughed.

She was such a child, in spite of her twenty-one years.

"And it's very nice being here," he said with gentle mimicry. "But you mustn't let me keep you up. It's quite time you were in bed and asleep."

"I can always go to sleep, but I can't always have some one to talk to."

He drew a chair up for her.

"Then I'll let you talk another ten minutes," he remarked.

But during the ten minutes he did most of the talking.

Juliette's entry roused them.

"The monsieur's room is ready," she said.

Wilson rose, guessing her mission.

He took Désirée's hand into his, holding it carefully in his strong grip.

"Good-night," he said, "and for heaven's sake don't leave that thing lying about."

With animosity he glanced at "The Necklace of Tears," which lay open in its case on the table, and which had shattered his plans.

The thing winked at him evilly, as if enjoying his discomfiture.

Then he went to bed, to be haunted by dreams of a girl—his fairy princess—seated on a throne high above him, too high for him to reach—a girl with a small, wistful face and diamonds streaming like tears from her tragic eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NECKLACE OF TEARS

The next morning the sun trickling through the wooden shutters roused Wilson. He got out of bed and pushed them wide open, to see what the place looked like by daylight.

The whole world was bathed in sunshine, making the rain of the previous evening seem impossible. In the distance, a misty blue on the skyline, the sea stretched. In between were rounded hills and deep valleys, where every sort of fruitful tree grew. On one side was a ridge of gray mountains, over which snow-clad heights peeped.

Then he looked at his immediate surroundings.

Below a garden lay—a large walled expanse set round with orange-trees. In it palm, fig, lemon, loquat, and walnut-trees flourished, with here and there a somber cypress, a clump of bamboo, a patch of cactus, or a golden rain of mimosa. There were old stone seats, crumbling statues, and broken arches where roses, wistaria, and honeysuckle ran riot. In the wilderness a few fowls scratched and a couple of tethered goats browsed.

Just below his window was a wide marble terrace. Up its white steps he must have stumbled the previous evening. In one corner, under the shade of a spreading tree, stood a battered iron table and a trio of chairs.

In one of the chairs Désirée sat, in the white dress she

had worn the previous afternoon, her hands lying listlessly on her knee, her eyes downcast.

As quickly as possible Wilson got into his clothes. The night before he had found them dried and neatly folded on a chair in his bedroom.

He was not long in making his way downstairs.

His step on the terrace made Désirée turn her head in his direction.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked politely, after he had greeted her.

Wilson had not slept specially well. There would be no more peaceful nights for him until his was the right to sleep with her within his arms. He was a strong man to whom love and passion had come for the first time. The new forces raging within him left him a trifle stunned and stupefied, not quite his usual observant self, more especially when he thought of that necklace coming between him and the girl he wanted.

"Yes, Countess," was all he could say at the moment.

Désirée got to her feet.

"Breakfast won't be ready for another quarter of an hour," she said. "Would you like to see my carnations? Pierre grows them because I love the scent of them."

"I would," he said, delighted to do anything or go anywhere she suggested.

She led the way down the marble steps. On reaching the bottom she turned her misty eyes towards the fragrant wilderness.

"I love the scent of the early morning, don't you? That's why I always have breakfast outside on the terrace, not in my room, as most French people do."

Wilson loved anything so long as she was there, and he agreed heartily.

She made her way towards a wooden gate at the far end of the garden. Opened, it showed grass-grown terraces on a sloping hillside, where olives and figs grew, and here and there a cherry, pear, peach, or almond-tree lifted white or pink blossoms against an azure sky. Near at hand were one or two cultivated patches, where lettuces, potatoes, peas, spinach, and broad beans grew. One little terrace was carefully guarded, roofed with rush mats set on wooden frames.

Towards that spot Désirée went. On reaching it she started to roll back one of the mats.

"Let me do that," Wilson said quickly, stooping over her.

A rush of incense greeted them from the flowers beneath, a wealth of prize carnations.

"Pierre would like to grow more flowers for me, but I won't let him," she said. "He has only strength enough to grow the things we must eat. All this land is mine," she went on, waving her hand vaguely round. "Juliette sells the fruit when she can. It's a great help now that things are so dear. Will you have one of my carnations?" she finished, stooping over the scented enclosure.

She held the flower towards him, smiling shyly as a lonely child might at a new-found friend. He took it eagerly, putting it in his buttonhole.

"That's the coat I wore," she said. "It smells quite different from other men's coats. And it feels quite different too," she continued, rubbing a slim finger up and down its rough surface.

"It is quite different," he said, "you don't get much of this sort of cloth in these parts. I wear it whenever I can. I like it because it smells of the open air, the sea, and the country, things that haven't come much into my

life. Now I've made my pile I'm not so sure I shan't retire and buy an estate somewhere, and go in for farming. It's what's wanted more than anything nowadays. But it's very difficult to get out of harness when you've been in it more than twenty years."

"It doesn't seem right that you should have had to work so hard," she replied with sympathy.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you seem so nice."

It was a child's reply, and Wilson laughed tenderly.

"Well, I hope you'll never change your opinion," he said.

Then his gaze went to the finger that was still rubbing his sleeve with the lightness of a butterfly's wing.

On that hillside, everything that could chirp or sing or whistle or buzz was chirping and singing and whistling and buzzing, and Wilson felt like joining in the joyous chorus.

Without a doubt the Countess de Mailly had taken a great fancy to him. And he began to patch up his dream.

He knew he was in a country where girls of the upper class were not allowed to pick and choose their husbands, but are compelled to marry those appointed by their parents and guardians. He would see to it that the little countess married the man she liked, no matter what matrimonial plans her uncle might have in view, if by phenomenal luck that man happened to be himself.

Although Désirée had never actually said so, all her talk implied that her uncle was her guardian—a very indifferent and selfish one, considering the straits she lived in.

If she stooped to love him, Wilson, he would marry

her, if he had to wade up to his neck in the gore of a hundred uncles.

From the house a faint sound was wafted, and into his blood-thirsty thoughts Désirée's soft voice came.

"I hear Juliette with the breakfast," she said.

She started towards the wooden gate leading into the tangled garden, making her way along weed-grown paths, through a scented wilderness where wistaria ran riot up gloomy cypresses, where roses and vines arched old arbors, and crept about silent fountains—a pale wraith of a girl, moving slowly, in a timid, hesitant manner, having now in complete thrall the man who walked beside her.

On the terrace the table was laid, a compromise between French and English style.

There were two thick cups the size of pudding bowls, a small jug of black coffee, a large one of hot goats' milk, a tiny bowl of coarse sugar, a portion of a long roll, a minute pat of butter, and, opposite the chair Juliette drew up for the guest, a couple of boiled eggs.

The sight of them took his thoughts to the £60 a year, and that, in all probability, his youthful hostess was sacrificing her own lunch or dinner, or both, to feed him.

"Why did you trouble to have eggs boiled for me?" he asked, on seating himself.

"I thought all English people had eggs for breakfast."

"Well, at least one French person is going to have an egg this morning," he said, putting one on her plate.

"Oh, no," she broke in quickly, "they're for you."

"I shall turn sulky," he threatened. "I shan't eat mine unless you eat yours."

There was a taking way about Wilson when he cared

to exercise it. And with that small, thin face turned towards him he used all his powers.

"There is so little I can offer you," she said. "It has not been very nice for you here. My house is very poor, and all English people are rich," she finished apologetically.

To Wilson his brief stay in the dilapidated old château had been heaven, but his acquaintance with her was too short for him to say so. Instead, he put the question that had been hovering on his lips ever since he had seen "The Necklace of Tears."

"The richest people in England haven't a lovely place like yours. But why don't you sell your necklace, Countess? Then you'd be as rich as any of us."

"My uncle wouldn't let me."

"But surely you can please yourself."

"He's my guardian," she said, as if that settled the matter. "Besides——"

She broke off.

"Besides—what?" he asked.

There was no reply.

He looked at the girl. All those generations had left her nothing but that necklace, pride, and a fragile, wistful beauty.

"Why should you deny yourself in any way for the sake of keeping an heirloom?" he questioned, thinking he had the reason of her reluctance to part with the jewel. "That sort of thing is out of date."

"I don't think I do," she said, a slight tremor in her gentle voice. "But if—if I sell it, the curse might fall on someone else. So I shall keep it and have it buried with me. Then it can do no further harm."

"So it's cursed, is it? I'm not surprised to hear that, considering the evil way it winked at me."

At his words her hands came together in a tight clasp.

"Did it look at *you* like that?" she asked anxiously.

"It can't do me any harm," he said lightly. "What is the curse supposed to be? I wish you'd tell me all about it."

"An ancestor of mine got it in one of the Crusades. He took it from the tomb of some Mohammedan saint. The priests tried to stop him. They said it was cursed. 'The Necklace of Tears' they called it, for whoever possessed it, misfortune would come on whatever the owner loved best."

"And did it?" Wilson asked.

"He loved his wife best of all, and when he got back home she was dead."

"And did it stop there?"

"No. The next de Mailly was a clever man who loved learning more than anything else, and he went mad."

"And then?"

"The next owner loved his eldest son beyond all else, and he saw the boy drown. It went on like that, bringing sorrow and tears to whichever of us possessed it, right up to my grandfather's day. He was a rich man who loved money best, and he lost everything except this house and the necklace."

"And how has the curse affected you?" Wilson asked, all interest.

There was a moment's hesitation on Désirée's part. Her lips opened, as if to make some confession, then closed again with the words unspoken, as they had done once before. An anxious expression crossed her face,

and her hand started to toy nervously with the fringed tablecloth.

"My father died before I was born, my mother when I was a week old," she said eventually in a low voice, her face averted.

As they talked, Juliette fussed round them, pouring out the coffee, cutting the loaf, taking the top off Désirée's egg, buttering her bread, as if the girl were four years old instead of twenty-one.

Wilson envied the old woman. All these things he would have liked to do. There was an air about the child as if, were she left to herself, she would be as helpless as a baby; a listless, weary air, as though the many generations before her had left her utterly tired out, an air one sometimes gets in the last members of a very old and exclusive family that has never married out of its class.

Over the simple repast Wilson lingered as long as he dared. Once it was finished he had no excuse for staying.

Eventually he rose.

"I must go now," he said reluctantly. "But may I come to-morrow and see if you're no worse for last night's outing?"

"Please do, if you would care to," she answered shyly.

"If you talk like that you'll find me rapidly developing into a nuisance," he answered. "I shall come so often and so frequently that you'll end up by ordering me off the premises."

Then he took her hand, holding it carefully, wishing he dared to kiss it in the gallant manner of her countrymen; in its smallness and weakness it seemed made for nothing else.

"Well, then, it's *au revoir*," he said gayly.

As Wilson made his way back along the narrow white road to Nice, the carnation Désirée had given him in his buttonhole, he whistled cheerfully.

He loved the Countess de Mailly, and it would not take much to make her love him. But her uncle would be sure to interfere. He would not let a dowry like that necklace go to a stray Englishman of no social standing.

Wilson snapped his fingers.

He cared just about that much for her uncle and his interference.

CHAPTER IX

AN EXPLANATION

On arriving at his hotel Wilson went first to the bureau to get the key of his room. As he was making his way across the large hall he met the manager. The latter spoke English well, and a slight friendship had grown up between them.

"Did you wonder what had happened to me last night?" Wilson asked.

"I thought perhaps the rain had detained you somewhere," the manager replied diplomatically.

"I was miles away in the country when it came on," Wilson explained. "But a good Samaritan found me, and gave me dinner and bed and breakfast—for love."

"You look as if you'd enjoyed the experience," the manager remarked.

"I did, immensely."

In spite of his own elation Wilson could not help noticing that the manager's face wore an air of depression.

"You're not looking specially gay," he commented.

"I'm not feeling it either. As a matter of fact I'm very worried just now."

"What about?" Wilson asked.

There was no reason so far as he knew for the manager to be worried. On the contrary, there was every cause for rejoicing. The hotel was full to overflowing, and the season looked as if it were a record one.

As if glad to find someone to whom he could unburden himself, the manager invited Wilson to his private office.

Asking him to be seated, he turned towards a cupboard. Producing whisky and soda, he helped his guest and himself.

"I'm pretty sure 'The Triple Alliance' will pay me another visit," he said gloomily on sitting down.

"'The Triple Alliance.' Who and what are they?"

"The smartest lot of jewel thieves that ever made an hotel manager's life a burden to him."

"Where do they hail from?" Wilson asked.

"No one knows. They were first heard of in America about six or seven years ago. They're not the ordinary style. They just pick up a valuable bracelet here and there and then pass on. They stole one worth nearly £1,000 in this hotel last December, and another worth £500 in Cannes about six weeks ago."

"But why bracelets specially? Why don't they take all they can lay hands on once they have the nerve to get into anyone's bedroom?"

"They don't work in bedrooms, but in public, at dances and the like, stealing bracelets off women's wrists. There's a big ball on here next Monday. All the swells in Nice are coming. Considering the amount of jewelry there'll be on show, I'm afraid I shan't escape their attentions, although I'm taking every precaution. It gives the place such a bad name, especially after that affair last December."

"Haven't the police any idea who they are?" Wilson inquired.

"Not the faintest. But they must be people of good appearance and address. For all I know, they may be

some of the smartest crowd staying in the hotel at this moment," the manager said despondently.

"But why 'The Triple Alliance'?"

"They were christened that in the States, for all the police there ever discovered was that there were three of them."

"It would need someone with a pretty good nerve to steal things in the open like that."

"It would, I agree. Yet 'The Triple Alliance' have stolen about £20,000 worth of jewelry during the last six years."

"You'll have quite a lot of private detectives on Monday then?"

"Private detectives aren't much use in a crowded ballroom."

"Then it seems you're pretty powerless," Wilson remarked, getting to his feet, "but I wouldn't worry about the thing until it happens."

As he made his way towards the lift, foremost in his mind was Désirée dé Mailly's necklace.

She was in that lonely house miles away from anywhere, with only two old servants and a dog. She had shown the necklace to him, a perfect stranger; she would be just as likely to show it to the next person who came along. News about a thing so valuable as her heirloom soon spreads. And there was this gang of jewel thieves working the Riviera!

Wilson felt he must go back at once to the old château in the mountains and ask Désirée to let him keep the necklace for her until her uncle came to take charge of it.

CHAPTER X

SECLUSION

The next afternoon the hoot of a motor reached Désirée as she sat knitting in a secluded corner of the garden. Close by was a deep wide reservoir, with a little tower at one end. Water lillies grew in it, and vines and roses climbed up the tower. Over the water palms and mimosa drooped, and about its low edge a mass of lavender grew. On one wall a huge stone crocodile crouched, water dripping softly from its open jaws into the old tank. Near it an orange tree, with great balls of golden fruit, gave green shade. An old stone seat stood under the tree, and, close by, a large, flat, oblong block of gray granite, that had once been an olive oil press, was doing duty as a table.

At the sound of the approaching motor the frightened girl dropped her work, and the hound, crouching at her feet, growled in a low, menacing manner. A strained expression came to her face. It must be either her uncle and cousin or Mr. Bassino.

Presently down the weed-grown path the old woman came shuffling.

"Who is it? Désirée asked in a frightened voice, before the servant had time to speak.

"It's the English gentleman, *ma petite.*"

A look of relief crossed the girl's face.

"Show him out here," she said. "And in a few minutes

bring some tea. Yes, and some of those biscuits you bought for my uncle and—and Mr. Bassino when they come."

"He will eat us out of house and home, this English monsieur," the old crone grumbled.

She shuffled off, back to the terrace where Wilson was waiting.

Like a needle towards a magnet he had been drawn towards the Domaine de Mailly. In a seethe of impatience he had spent the previous afternoon and all that morning staring into the best shops in Nice, wanting nothing but to buy things for Désirée, wondering what, on so short an acquaintance, he dared to take her.

Finally, he purchased a large wicker basket full of crystallized fruit, a specialty of the Riviera, that had in it, among other delicacies, a whole pineapple and a melon. Considering she lived in the wilds where dainties were not easily procured, he bought, also, a large box of cakes and another of chocolates, his one idea being to try and get that half-starved look out of her face.

On the terrace he now awaited Juliette's return, the three parcels in his motor just below.

Presently the old woman came back. She mumbled something and pointed a skinny finger towards a weed-grown path. From her gestures Wilson understood his quarry was to be found there.

Retrieving his parcels, he went in that direction.

There was no mistaking the look of welcome on the little face turned towards him.

"So you're none the worse for your adventure?" he said after greeting Désirée.

"No. And you, monsieur?" she asked shyly.

"I'm always flourishing nowadays. More so than ever just at present," he added, smiling at her.

Then he put the three packages on the seat at her side.

"Considering you live so far away from civilization, I thought you wouldn't be offended if I brought a few cakes," he continued.

"It's very kind of you. We don't often get nice cakes up here, not like the ones I have when I go to parties with my uncle and cousin."

She bent over his gifts, touching them in the nervous, shortsighted way he knew so well now.

"Why, there are three parcels!" she exclaimed.

"One is crystallized fruit and the other chocolates," he said apologetically. "The woman in the shop where I bought the cakes pressed them on me, and I hadn't the moral courage to refuse."

"Crystallized fruit and chocolates! Oh, how lovely!"

Already she had seized the wicker basket and was opening it.

She lifted the lid and ran a finger lightly over one of the fruits.

"That's a pineapple, a whole pineapple," she said. "And that's a melon," she went on, touching another, "and that's a prickly pear," she continued, laying a finger on a third.

Wilson watched her, too infatuated to see anything except the delight his gifts had caused.

Then she opened the cakes and the chocolates.

"Don't they smell nice? You've brought enough for an army. You must think I'm greedy."

All at once she turned towards him, suddenly remembering her duties as hostess.

"I'm keeping you standing. Do sit down."

He seated himself beside her. She picked up her knitting and started working away industriously.

Wilson watched her. They fascinated him, those slender white hands so busily at work on the soft wool, and the small face to which his coming had brought a look of furtive happiness.

Presently tea arrived, and a saucer on which half-a-dozen biscuits reposed.

"Will—will you pour the tea?" Désirée asked. "That teapot is so big and heavy."

It was a great brown earthenware coffee-pot, about a quarter full.

Wilson was only too ready to wait on her, to do any task she deigned to assign to him.

The tea was of a pale yellow, and tasted principally of smoke. In spite of this it seemed to him the most delicious he had ever tasted, taken with Désirée in that peaceful garden, where the air was filled with the scent of wild lavender and roses, and the gentle drip of water.

He had what he wanted, his fairy princess all to himself, to wait on and tend and pet, as the two old servants did. He would have stuffed her with the dainties he had brought. No sooner had she finished one cake than he was holding the box towards her again, but she first missed her aim, and then fumbled in getting the cake out. A frightened look crossed her face, and her hands started to tremble so that Wilson glanced round, wondering what the matter was, thinking some of her relatives—whom he already cordially hated—had invaded their paradise, and were going to give the child a severe lecture for entertaining stray men.

Seeing no one, he had to account for her agitation in some other way.

She was upset at her own clumsiness—the clumsiness of a shy, nervous girl.

"You're a bit shortsighted, aren't you, Countess?" he remarked, with the idea of putting her at her ease.

At his words she flushed painfully, and the tears rose to her eyes.

His comment took her appetite away. When he offered the cakes again she refused.

Wilson had arranged with himself to stay an hour, but it was nearly two hours before he rose to go. During the time he talked to Désirée about her dog, her knitting, the trees and flowers round, any impersonal subject that entered his head, and that would bring him a soft, shy answer, for he had quickly seen that she was not used to asserting herself, or accustomed to taking the lead in any way.

It was not Wilson's habit to let grass grow under his feet. Besides, her uncle might turn up any minute and clog his wheel.

When he got up to go he said:

"I'm going to take you out for lunch to-morrow, Countess, to Monte Carlo, so you can expect me round with the car about half-past ten."

"Oh, no. No, thank you," she said quickly, alarm in her voice.

"How's that? Don't you trust my driving?"

"I never go about alone."

Wilson remembered that French girls of her class did not go out unchaperoned with their male acquiantances.

"Juliette will make an excellent chaperone," he said.

"I—I'd rather not go," she faltered.

He was surprised at her refusal. Her every action said she liked him, that his attentions were welcome. He had a gift for gaining the confidence of anything weaker

than himself, and when he turned this talent on the girl he loved it amounted to genius.

"Have you taken a sudden dislike to me?" he asked teasingly.

"You know it isn't that," she whispered.

"What is it, then?" he asked coaxingly, bending over her.

There was a moment's silence. Her lips opened, as if to make some confession, and closed again with the words unspoken, as he had noticed once or twice before.

He bent a little lower.

"What is the dreadful crime?" he asked gently.

"I'm very nervous unless I'm with people who—who understand me," she confessed.

He could quite believe that. There was an air about her as if she had never lived in this world, but in one of her own, quite apart.

"I flatter myself that I understand you," he said. "It would give me so much pleasure to take you," he went on persuasively. "You must give a thought to that before you turn me down. You wouldn't like to send me away in tears, now would you?"

She laughed, a little tremulous ripple of amusement. And Wilson felt he could go on making idiotic remarks for the rest of his life, so long as they chased that tragic look from her face.

"I couldn't imagine you crying, *mon ami,*" she said.

"I shall if you don't say 'yes.' I shall weep gallons here in front of you, until your stony heart is melted."

Wilson intended to have his own way. When it came to a battle of wills between a man like himself and a girl like Désirée de Mailly, there was not much doubt as to which would be victor.

"I should like to go for a drive, but not for lunch," she said.

It seemed to Wilson that he knew the reason of her modified acceptance of his invitation. If she lunched out, there might be people present who knew her and would report her proceedings to her relatives, and a scolding would be the outcome.

He had no wish for this to happen, not until his was the right to take his stand beside her and bear the brunt of her guardian's anger; so he did not press the matter farther.

"Very well, I'll come round for you at half-past two then," he said.

He was most anxious to take her somewhere, apart from the pleasure it gave him.

The last two hours he had spent with her had left him amazed at her ignorance. She appeared to know nothing at all of what was happening in the world, next to nothing of it. He had gathered from her conversation that she had never been to a theater or a music-hall, or to a concert even, that she could not play bridge, or drive a motor, or play tennis, or hockey, or golf, or billiards, and knew nothing of the pastimes the average girl of her position indulged in.

"But do you never go anywhere or see anything?" he had asked, astonished.

"Sometimes I go to dances with my uncle and cousin, but not very often."

"But every girl ought to have a good time," he had said.

Wistfully she had smiled at him.

Then Wilson had remembered the £60 a year, and he had said no more on the subject, for it seemed to him

that poverty shut her off from the world and all its amusements.

Having drawn a consent from the girl, he was silent for a moment. Her mention of dances had brought "The Triple Alliance" back to his mind.

"And I want you to do one more thing for me," he went on, after a brief pause. "There's a gang of smart jewel thieves somewhere near here just at present. I want you to let me have charge of your heirloom until your uncle comes. If they ever get an inkling of the existence of a necklace like yours, they'll be here in no time."

Wilson expected more of a battle over the necklace than over the invitation.

To his surprise she arose at once.

"I shouldn't like it to be stolen," she said, alarm in her voice. "My uncle would be so cross. I'll fetch it at once.

Wilson watched her go, loving her more than ever. She trusted him implicitly, this girl who had known him barely forty-eight hours!

He was well on his way back to Nice, with "The Necklace of Tears" in his pocket, when he recollected that Désirée knew neither his name nor address. She had called him "monsieur" at first, and once or twice during tea *"mon ami."* She had never inquired where he was staying, who he was, or what he was doing in Nice. She seemed to take him for granted, as some one who came out of another world into hers.

He laughed to himself. He would see that such perfect trust and innocence had its right reward.

CHAPTER XI

THE GILBERTS

By moonlight, the country between Dijon and Lyons, when passed through swiftly when one is half asleep in the "Paris—Marseilles *rapide,*" looks like a flat white expanse, with here and there a silvery sheet of water, and always tall trees with long bare trunks sticking up on the landscape, solitary clumps and rows, for all the world like gigantic bulrushes.

That night there were no trains going swiftly southward. An unlooked-for strike had upset the plans and calculations of many a person.

The strike had sadly interfered with the arrangements of the Gilberts. And now an unexpected hitch in their motor had added to their misfortunes. For the last three hours they had been stranded on a long stretch of lonely, moon-flooded road.

Whilst Eugene leaned over the engine of the big racing car, his father cursed profusely in a variety of languages.

"A fortune in the hands of that little fool, and us stranded here," he fumed.

Then he shook his fist towards the distant railway.

"Curse them," he shouted.

From the raised hood came a muffled laugh.

"Curses won't end the strike, *mon père,* or it would have been over in five minutes. Nor will they mend the

car, or get us to Nice. It would be more to the point if you gave me that spanner. Besides, I don't mind betting you that you'll find 'The Necklace of Tears' a fraud."

The Count de Gilbert picked up the spanner that an oily finger indicated.

"But I saw it once, years ago, Eugene," he persisted. "I tell you it's worth more than a million dollars to-day. Think what that means to us, once we get hold of it."

"If we get hold of the original necklace, that is," Eugene answered smoothly. "But I'm pretty certain your planning and scheming will come to nothing. Would the old Count de Mailly have kept the necklace had it been worth anything, and have lived for a quarter of a century in abject poverty? He sold the original years ago, before the smash. You'll find the present one a vile imitation."

"He wouldn't sell it, I tell you," the older man said with impatient anger. "He loved it more than wife or child. It spelt his god—money."

Out of the bonnet came an ejaculation of disbelief, and the remark:

"Would I keep a thing worth a fortune, and live on bread and radishes? Not much! That necklace has obsessed you since the day the old Count died."

"So it would you if you were my age. I tell you the life we lead is too nerve-wearing for a man of my years."

"It's a gay life, that's the main thing."

Eugene paused.

"There's a Mrs. Green staying in Nice at present, the wife of a rich English manufacturer—a fat old woman, smothered with jewelry, who dotes on me. I shan't let the substance go for the shadow. We've only a thousand francs between us. I shall keep an eye on her, in case the necklace doesn't come up to expectations."

So saying, Eugene straightened himself and closed the bonnet.

"Now, *mon cher,*" he went on, wiping his hands on an oily cloth, "that little hitch is righted at last. But we've only enough petrol for another fifty miles, then time will be lost in a hunt for more."

His words set his father fuming again, wringing his hands in a sort of mad despair at the thought of the fortune in his niece's keeping that he was not there "to take charge of."

The Count de Gilbert would have fumed still more had he known that "The Necklace of Tears" had changed hands, that it no longer had an unworldly girl for its guardian, but was in the keeping of a wide-awake business man.

CHAPTER XII

A MOTOR TRIP

The next afternoon Wilson was driving his car carefully up the twisted lane that led to the old château. Olive trees lined the drive, gnarled and distorted, their gray, petrified-looking trunks splashed with greenish-yellow lichen. Occasionally there were clumps of spiky aloes. Here and there a Judas-tree dripped purple tears on the weed-grown drive—trees quite big enough to hang one's self on.

The hoot of his horn reached Désirée as she sat on the terrace, dressed and ready, with a white cloak on a chair beside her. On this occasion she did not start and tremble. Somewhere within the house a clock had just struck half-past two, and she knew who the visitor was.

She was snatching a fleeting joy from the fact of Wilson's company, but she had been too long subservient to her guardian to think as yet of enlisting her new friend's aid against the approaching marriage she hated. There was a fearsome joy attached to being with this Englishman, and terror also, lest he should find out a certain fact about her, and, because of it, turn from her—a fact she was doing her best to keep from him.

Wilson's step on the terrace brought a shy look of welcome to her face.

"Are you quite ready?" he asked, after greeting her.

She stood up at once, her hand going to the cloak on the chair beside her.

Askance he looked at the wrap. It was a pretty garment, white and fringed, but thin and of poor quality, painfully inadequate for a long motor drive.

"You'd better have something thicker," he remarked.

"I—I haven't anything thicker. I don't often go motoring."

He was sorry he had spoken, and he cursed himself for a clumsy fool. How could the child have clothes for all occasions on £60 a year!

"Never mind," he said soothingly, "I've an extra coat in the car."

Because his words had distressed her, he drew her arm through his, with a little patting, consoling gesture, and went with her down the steps to the car.

He took a thick overcoat from the car, and assisted her into it.

"It's like your other coat, *mon ami*," she remarked, when it was on, rubbing a finger up and down its surface.

He laughed tenderly. She seemed to have an affection even for his clothes, this poor, neglected little fairy princess.

"It's much the same sort of thing," he answered.

He helped her into the car, into the seat next the driver's. She arranged herself in the slow way he was accustomed to now, as if she had not strength to hurry.

Afterwards he wrapped a rug about her knees. Then, producing another, he tucked Juliette away in the back of the car, as if she were a luncheon hamper.

Seating himself beside Désirée, he set off down the drive.

Once out on the high road they raced along, with a wealth of peaceful hills and shady valleys on either side, and a stretch of azure sea in the distance.

More than once Wilson glanced at his companion.

She sat in silence, her hands clasped on her knee, her misty eyes downcast beneath their dark, fringing lashes. Despite the beauty of the view, she never once looked to the right or the left, or made any comment on the scenery.

But now he had learned that, like an old-fashioned child, she rarely spoke unless spoken to.

"Are you fond of motoring, Countess?" he asked presently.

"I like to feel the wind on my face," she answered.

He urged the car still faster, and was not long in reaching Nice. There a more sober pace had to be adopted. They drove through the town, along a palm-grown promenade, where the blue sea broke on gray pebbles.

"That's where I'm staying," he remarked presently, glancing towards a palatial hotel.

"Yes," she said in a low voice, but she did not look in the direction he had indicated.

It was on his lips to ask Désirée to let him take her to the dance at the hotel the following evening, but he remembered that Juliette would hardly do for a chaperone on such an occasion.

In course of time Nice was left behind. The car mounted the hills on the other side, climbing upwards along a road that curled among the mountains, giving glimpses of deep clefts full of pines and eucalyptus trees.

All at once the sea burst into view again, far below a glorious stretch, in streaks and patches of sapphire, jade, and navy, that melted away into distance, where Corsica lay like a shadow on the horizon.

Above was a cloudless sky of deepest blue. The air was gold, tinged with sunshine. From the heights above

came the soft, cold breath of snow, from below the incense of pines, and a slight salt breeze from the sea.

"We're going along the Grande Corniche," Désirée remarked presently. "Once Eugene took me. I love it. It is so cool and sweet."

Wilson drove slowly along a mountain road that is perhaps one of the most magnificent routes in the world, anxious that his companion should miss nothing of the panorama unfolding before them.

A turn in the road brought a bald, gray, buttress-like rock into view, standing well below them but high above the sea. On it a tiny village huddled, looking as if hewn out of the solid rock, so at one with it that the place could easily have been overlooked.

"That must be Eze," Wilson said.

"Juliette has a married daughter living there," Désirée volunteered.

A further bend in the road brought a burst of snow-clad heights, a round of gray hills and deep green valleys up which pines marched.

"Don't those mountains look a treat with the sun on them?" he remarked, glancing at the glittering white peaks that pierced an azure sky.

Désirée turned her face to meet their cold, pure breath.

"Yes," she said, her voice a whisper.

On arriving at Monte Carlo, Wilson drew up before the finest hotel in the place.

"Shall we have tea here?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she said quickly.

At once he started the car again.

"Of course we won't, if you'd rather not, little girl," he said, his mind on her relatives, his one desire to gain her confidence. "I'm only out to do what you want. I'll

get a box of chocolates at the next shop we pass, and we'll make that do instead."

"I haven't eaten a quarter of what you brought yesterday," she said in a relieved tone of voice.

"You must nibble your way through them quicker than that, for I'm coming to see you again to-morrow afternoon and I shall bring another box."

"Are you coming to-morrow?" she exclaimed, like a pleased child. "It is so nice to have a friend."

As Wilson drove along, he wondered how long the time would be before he could propose. A three days' acquaintance seemed a trifle hurried, a week unthinkably long. So he decided to wait another two days. Then he brought it down to one.

It would be just as well to make sure of the little Countess before her guardian arrived.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GILBERTS VISIT DÉSIRÉE

Late that night the hoot of a motor coming along the distant road reached Désirée. When the sound fell on her ears she was sitting at her open bedroom window, through which a soft scented breeze wafted. It was well after midnight, and only a car bound for her premises would be likely to come along the road at that hour. And the time of its arrival said it was not Mr. Bassino.

She had been brooding on the Brazilian, the man she would so soon have to call "husband," although to her the word held no meaning except that he would be with her always, and his would be the right to kiss and fondle her. It seemed to her that death would be preferable.

She had been thinking about Wilson too. The next time he came she would tell him about the approaching marriage she hated; he was so kind and strong, this English friend who had come so unexpectedly into her life, that he might be able to do something to help her.

But with the hoot of that motor in her ears her decision began to waver. Her guardian was coming; he would insist on the marriage. Would she dare to go against his decree?

Her small hands clasped each other in an agony of helplessness.

If only she had told her new friend about Mr. Bassino! If only she could be quite sure of his aid!

A nearer hoot brought her to her feet hurriedly, her white cotton dressing-gown falling in soft folds about her, her golden hair hanging in two thick plaits to her knees. Without pausing to light a candle, she passed across the dark room and then down the long black corridor, a white wraith in the shadows.

Outside one of the heavy wooden doors she paused, and, knocking, opened it.

"Juliette, I hear them coming," she called breathlessly.

The woman got up, a withered figure in a calico night-gown, an old-fashioned tasselled nightcap on her wisp of iron-gray hair.

Crossing the room, she pushed open one of the tightly shut windows, and stood with her head poked out, listening.

Another hoot, closer at hand, came to break the silence of the night.

"Oh, yes, it's them this time," she muttered.

"Where's Wolf?" the girl asked anxiously. "He doesn't like them, and Eugene has threatened to shoot him if he dares to growl at him again."

A look of anxiety came to Juliette's face.

"He's in the hall, *ma petite*. Call him and shut him in your bedroom, and keep him there all night if they should be sleeping here."

Like a shadow Désirée passed quickly down the wide, dark staircase.

"Wolf! Wolf!" she called softly.

The echoes of her soft voice went whispering through the gloomy length of the huge hall.

A moment later a cold nose touched her hand.

Putting a finger through the dog's collar, she took him

upstairs into her own room. Shutting the door carefully, she went downstairs again into the dining room.

Presently Juliette appeared with a lamp, which she set on the table.

There was the sound of a car drawing up near the terrace, followed almost immediately by a loud knock on the front door.

Juliette left the room.

A few moments later the two Gilberts entered.

Désirée turned to meet the newcomers.

"I hope you had a pleasant journey," she said dutifully, after greeting her uncle.

"A pleasant journey!" he snapped. "How could it have been a pleasant journey with this strike on?"

Eugene came forward, flicking his leather gloves playfully against her face, yet with a sting that streaked her cheek with red and made her wince with pain.

"Your uncle had booked berths in the *wagon lit, ma chérie,*" he remarked, "so he didn't take kindly to four days in the motor, not to mention the dust and the vile hotels. But aren't you going to say you're pleased to see me?"

"Of course I am, Eugene," she said nervously.

"Well, you haven't a very effusive way of showing it. Give me a kiss, little cousin."

He would have taken one there and then, but Désirée moved away.

"I don't like being kissed," she said, distress in her voice.

"But I like kissing you, which is the main thing so far as I'm concerned."

He slipped an arm around her and drew her to his side, laughing when she tried to get away. Then he

kissed her, not once, but several times. When he released her she was tearful and trembling.

"Let her alone, can't you?" his father interposed. "There are plenty of other women, without you starting on her."

"Désirée is different—so innocent and frightened, so refreshingly resistant. No wonder Bassino went mad over her. I should have done so myself except that we were brought up together."

The mere mention of the Brazilian's name made the girl shiver. Eugene noted this, and he laughed in a cruel manner.

"He'll be here any day now, my child," he went on. "Then, if you faint every time he kisses you, you'll spend your life in fainting."

"You mustn't take all your cousin says too much to heart," her uncle broke in, seating himself and drawing the girl to his side.

"So, Désirée, you're twenty-one?" he continued, in the same would-be amiable manner.

"Yes, Uncle."

"And did old Froillet bring you the family heirloom, according to the terms of your grandfather's will?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Then let us have a look at it. I want to see what the de Mailly curse is really like," he said, a parched, covetous note in his voice.

"I'm sorry, uncle, but it isn't here."

There was a moment of tense silence.

"Isn't here? What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"I showed it to an English gentleman, and he said it wasn't safe to keep it here in this lonely place. He asked

me to let him look after it until you came, so I did, because I knew you wouldn't like to have it stolen."

The Count de Gilbert just stared at the girl, but Eugene laughed.

"Mon Dieu! What innocence!" he ejaculated.

With a snarl his father turned on him.

"You laugh!" he gasped. "You laugh!"

"Well, isn't it one of the biggest jokes that ever came our way? We shall see neither that Englishman nor the necklace again."

"He said he would bring it back when you came, and I know he will," Désirée put in with trembling indignation.

Her voice made her uncle turn in her direction again.

"What is the man's name?"

"I don't know. I met him by chance on the road here."

For a moment he looked at her as if he could not believe his ears.

"You little fool! You little fool!" he cried savagely.

"It proves the necklace was worth having, or this Englishman wouldn't have gone off with it," Eugene remarked.

Then he turned to his cousin.

"Where is he staying, Désirée, my innocent?"

"I don't know. I never asked him."

"I told you that necklace would prove a fraud, but it's even more of a sell than I expected," he said, this time addressing his father.

"Ring for Juliette, you fool, and find out what she knows," was the savage answer.

All the bells in the house were broken, but Eugene's call reached the old woman, crouched in the dark hall, listening to the angry voices in the dining room.

The moment she appeared the old Count turned on her furiously.

"Who has been tampering with your mistress?" he demanded.

"An Englishman has been here once or twice, that's all," she answered.

"Do you know the Countess has given him 'The Necklace of Tears'?"

"The necklace is the Countess Désirée's to do what she likes with," Juliette answered defiantly.

Again Eugene laughed.

"This is what you didn't expect, *mon père,*" he remarked. "'A pretty kettle of fish,' that Englishman would say."

"There's no need for you to be so angry, uncle," Désirée broke in. "The gentleman is coming here tomorrow afternoon, and I know he will give you the necklace when you ask him for it."

Eugene glanced at her sharply.

"You seem to know a lot about him, Désirée, even if you don't know his name and address. You prefer him to Bassino, eh?"

His comment brought a flood of color to her thin cheeks, and had the effect of silencing her completely.

CHAPTER XIV

WILSON MEETS THE GILBERTS

The following afternoon, when Wilson entered his paradise, he found the serpent there. The first indication he had of its presence was a large racing car drawn up under the terrace. It did not need Juliette's gestures to tell him Désirée's guardian had arrived.

Leaving in his car the offerings he had brought for his goddess, he made his way along the weed-grown path towards the shady corner by the old stone reservoir with the crocodile, where he gathered Désirée and her uncle were.

He found not only her guardian there, but another man whom he guessed to be her cousin, for the two were unmistakably father and son, both polished men of the world, of a class that had not come into Wilson's life hitherto.

Wilson's footsteps brought a blush to the girl's face which her cousin was quick to note. She turned towards him nervously, as if to make some request. Whatever the request was, it remained unspoken, bitter experience having taught her that anything she asked her cousin not to do was the very thing he did.

Eugene heard Wilson's approach also. He glanced round and surveyed the newcomer in a supercilious manner.

"So this is the man little Désirée fancies," he remarked teasingly, *sotto voce.*

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His comment made her color deepen.

With trembling voice she greeted Wilson.

"This is the English gentleman who so kindly took charge of my necklace," she said, introducing him to her relatives.

Then she turned towards him again.

"Monsieur, this is my uncle, the Count de Gilbert, and my cousin, Eugene. They both speak English," she said.

After that she sat in silence, obviously ill at ease.

The Gilberts greeted Wilson cordially; nevertheless he was made to feel that, but for the fact of the necklace being in his possession, they would be quite equal to calling him "my good man."

He had always known that he would dislike Désirée's relatives, but he did not know he would dislike them quite so heartily.

At their invitation he seated himself; then the Count inquired his name and address.

"I understand my niece did not bother about making these inquiries," he finished, smiling at Désirée, as if the fact of her *naïveté* amused him.

Wilson mentioned who he was and where he was staying.

"Living all alone here in the country seems to have made the Countess de Mailly remarkably unworldly," he added.

Although he had no intention of wearing his heart on his sleeve, he could not keep a touch of tenderness out of his voice on mentioning her name.

"Of course, circumstances naturally tend to make her so," her uncle remarked.

Immediately Wilson associated the comment with her poverty, and he felt an intense hatred for the two men.

They had every appearance of wealth and prosperity. That car of theirs was the latest and most up-to-date pattern, and must have cost about £2,000. Yet they refused to let the child sell her heirloom, and left her to starve on £60 a year and the little that could be made on the produce of her estate.

There was a brief silence.

Until meeting the Gilberts, Wilson had had the greater dislike for Désirée's uncle, but now he positively loathed her cousin. He hated Eugene's every look and action—his handsome, polished exterior, the cut and fit of his clothes, his aristocratic air; but most of all the way he sat with his chair quite close to Désirée's, his arm along the back of hers, every now and again touching her cheek, or playing with the loose curls that twisted themselves so fascinatingly about her white neck. And it was evident she did not want his attentions. She drew away each time he touched her, with an air of helpless resistance. And he seemed to take a wicked delight in teasing her.

Eugene himself broke the silence, speaking in French quickly, and smiling maliciously as he spoke.

"I don't think much of your choice, Désirée. The man looks like a navvy in his Sunday clothes. He's 'no class,' as his own sort in England would say."

Although Wilson could not understand what was said, he heard the disparaging tone. He heard the "no class" too; for that was said in his own language, and he was pretty certain he was being referred to.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that, Eugene," Désirée said in French, with gentle dignity. "Mr. Wilson is my friend."

"When Bassino comes along he'll soon send your friend to the right about. He won't allow any trespassers.

Aren't you counting the days until he comes? Didn't you cry your eyes out because the strike has kept him away?"

Wilson watched the two, wondering what was being said, noting the girl's terrorized expression, the man's cruel, teasing tone, feeling above all things that he would like to thrash the handsome devil.

The Count's voice attracted Wilson's attention.

"My niece tells me you very kindly volunteered to take charge of her necklace until I came."

Wilson agreed he had. Then he explained how he had met Désirée, and the circumstances that led up to the necklace being in his keeping.

During his speech a slight smile lingered on Eugene's face.

"What do you think of it?" the latter asked.

"I've seen enough of gems to know it's worth a fortune," Wilson replied. "And the last place to keep it is in this lonely house, and the last person to have charge of it is the Countess de Mailly."

The Gilberts exchanged glances, and an avaricious, relieved look crept into the Count's eyes.

"Well, well, you must blame the railway strike," the latter answered, in a voice that had suddenly grown flat with emotion. "In the ordinary course of events I should have been here to take charge of it. However, no harm is done, and we must thank you, Mr. Wilson, for troubling yourself in the matter."

He paused, expecting Wilson to hand over the necklace there and then.

Although Wilson knew this was expected of him, he showed no signs of producing the heirloom.

"Now that we are here," Eugene put in suavely, "it'll be quite safe for my cousin to have her necklace."

"I'm sorry, but I haven't it with me," Wilson said smoothly. "For safety's sake I deposited it with my banker."

This was not true. At that moment the necklace was lying in a little washleather bag in one of his inner pockets. Since it had been in his keeping, in the daytime it rested on his heart, at night under his pillow, where he tossed on it in fitful slumber, hoping Désirée would put her future into his hands as readily as she had put her necklace.

Although her uncle and cousin had greeted him with affability and friendliness, he did not trust them. His one idea was not to let the necklace fall into their possession, and the only excuse he could think of was to pretend it was at the bank.

At his reply there was a moment's pause, and the Count de Gilbert's throat jerked with a peculiar choking movement.

"And a very safe place for it to be," he said, when he had swallowed his chagrin. "But we won't trouble you to come up here with it. We'll come around to your hotel for it to-morrow at about eleven in the morning."

Wilson could find no excuse for keeping it longer.

"Eleven will suit me all right," he said. "I shall be quite glad to get rid of the responsibility and know it's in safe keeping."

A look of relief passed over the Count's face, but Eugene's gaze rested on him speculatively.

"You must stay and have chocolate with us," the elder Gilbert went on. "Or tea, if you prefer it. That's what the English generally drink at this hour, is it not?"

Wilson looked at Désirée, hoping she would second the invitation.

Since the introduction she had not addressed a word to him. She sat with her eyes downcast, knitting, and every now and again her hands stumbled over the work.

Each time her uncle or cousin spoke she started nervously, and her hands trembled as they worked away at the soft wool. All through the interview it had been obvious to Wilson that she lived in terror of her relatives, and the fact cut him to the quick. It was torture to him to see the girl he loved so wildly and passionately, and with all the force of his strong nature, reduced to such a state of fear by those who should have been her protectors. Above all things, he wanted to go to her side, to take those trembling hands into one of his, to put his arm round her slender, drooping figure, to press her close to him, so that she could feel all the strength and protection that lay within his embrace, to whisper in her ear:

"There's no need to be afraid of those two villains now, Princess. I'm here to look after you."

But he could only sit still in his chair, under a mask of good fellowship, hating the Gilberts with a deep and silent hatred.

Villains, that was what his mind had dubbed them, for only villains could find it in their nature to inspire with terror so gentle and timid a child.

Since Désirée did not second her uncle's invitation, Wilson rose to go.

It was obvious that for some reason she wanted him to go.

"I'm sorry I can't stay," he said, "but I have to be back at half-past four."

So saying, he made his adieux.

He went back to his car, at odds with the whole world.

There was no mistake about it that the Gilberts had turned Désirée against him.

With a gloomy look on his face he got into his car, but there was some slight hitch that prevented it from starting, and he had to get out again.

He was not long in rectifying matters. Then he set off down the drive.

As he turned out of the garden, he saw Désirée coming along one of the tangled paths. He stopped at once, for it seemed as if she had come purposely to waylay him.

In a moment he was at her side.

"You won't fail to let my uncle have the necklace?" she said anxiously. "He was so angry when he heard what I had done. He says it was very foolish of me to trust a total stranger."

Tenderly Wilson watched her.

"I was hoping I was long past the stage of a stranger," he said.

"Yes. But——"

It seemed to Wilson that counter influences were already at work, coming between him and his ideal.

There was a brief pause.

He was wondering whether he would propose there and then, before matters grew worse. But he saw that the girl was nervous and agitated, in no mood to listen to what he had to say.

"I want to see you alone, Countess," he said presently. "What about to-night after dinner?"

"I think my uncle wants to take me out."

"Well, to-morrow morning then, quite early?"

"Oh, yes," she said at once. "My uncle and Eugene are never here in the morning."

"Then you can expect me between nine and ten, so that

I can get back to Nice in time to deliver up your necklace."

He made a mental addition—"if necessary."

If Désirée deigned to accept him, Wilson intended to keep the necklace. He would have as much right to it then as her relatives, and he would see to it that it was put where the Gilberts could not get at it.

So thinking, he took the helpless hands that had put the necklace into his with such perfect trust and innocence, and, lifting them to his lips, kissed them tenderly.

CHAPTER XV

A PAIR OF KNAVES

In the meantime by the reservoir the Gilberts sat talking.

"Well, Eugene," the older man was saying, with an air of triumph, "you see I was right about the necklace. A fortune in our hands."

"It isn't in our hands," his son replied. "It's in Wilson's hands, which, believe me, is rather different."

"What do you mean?" the old Count asked sharply.

"It wouldn't surprise me if he found some excuse for not giving it up. He may even decamp with it between now and to-morrow. He's a sharp customer."

For a moment his words placed his father beyond speech.

"Then why hasn't he gone off sooner?" he managed to gasp at length.

"Because he wants to make a legitimate deal of it. He wants Désirée as well. Your head is so full of the necklace that you can't see what's going on under your nose. We're not out of the woods yet."

"We can force him to give it up," the Count spluttered.

"It won't be so easy to force a man like Wilson. We've no proof that he has the necklace, no receipt, only Désirée's word. And as for going to the police about the matter, it would be most undiplomatic on our part. Even *you* will agree with this," his son went on.

At this remark a scared look came to the Count's face.

"Wilson may propose to Désirée," Eugene continued. "She'd be sure to accept him, for she likes Wilson and loathes Bassino. It would be no use telling Wilson she's promised to the Dago. He'd merely put the question of preference to the girl, and leave the choice with her. In fact he'd be quite equal to running off with her, if we frightened her into saying 'No' to him. Where should we be then? With Désirée married to a man like Wilson, our source of income would be swept away. And he'd see to it that the necklace didn't go astray. He doesn't trust us. He had his tongue in his cheek when he said 'safe keeping.' No, no, it seems to me our future was never darker than at this moment, with both Désirée and the necklace likely to fall into the Englishman's clutches."

"No man in his senses would marry her," the Count interrupted.

"Bassino has paid us fifty thousand dollars and more to be allowed to do it, and he knows nothing about the heirloom that ought to go with her. I don't mind betting you one of Mrs. Green's bracelets that we shan't get 'The Necklace of Tears' in any hurry," Eugene concluded.

"I was hoping we'd finished with all that," his father said, anxiety in his voice.

"At the present moment we've two hundred francs in the funds. With care it may last us a couple of days."

"For heaven's sake don't let us run any more risks. Sell the motor to keep us going until we get the necklace."

"Not much. I like to think I've got that car, in case we have to leave anywhere in a hurry."

There was a moment's silence.

Leisurely Eugene drew a cigarette case from his pocket.

"The de Mailly necklace is living up to its reputation,"

he remarked as he lighted up. "You love it better than you love your own son. You have schemed and planned for twenty-one years to get it, and in pursuit of it I'm pretty certain you've condemned Désirée to a life that must be hell. And now, knowing you'd sell your soul for it, the necklace avoids you. It's really the devil's own joke," he concluded.

The Count de Gilbert said nothing. He sat staring straight before him, a gray, pinched look on his face.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BRACELET

In one of the principal hotels in Nice a dance was taking place. The ballroom was a large circular hall with a sort of cloister running round it. Just now, with palms and screens and curtains, the columned way was made up into numerous little secluded corners. In spite of the size of the hall, it was crowded. The whole place was a crush of fashionably dressed and wealthy people.

In one of the many recesses Mrs. Green sat with Eugene de Gilbert. He leaned back with an arm half round her bare shoulders, toying with one of her hands. As he talked, for all his suave politeness, a look of suppressed amusement lurked in his dark eyes.

"Nothing sets off a pretty arm so much as a pretty bracelet," he was saying, as he played with the one on her wrist.

It was an expensive piece of jewelry, but vulgar and blatant—a band of diamonds set in gold.

"It's not bad," she remarked, her gaze resting with satisfaction on the ornament. "It cost Mr. Green £2,000. He gave it to me on our silver wedding day."

"You don't mean to say you've been married twenty-five years!" he exclaimed. "I understood child marriages weren't tolerated in England."

At his compliment she giggled.

"What pretty things you do say, to be sure."

"It's the truth, I assure you," he said earnestly. "I never dreamt you were a day over thirty. I only hope Mr. Green appreciates his good luck," he finished with a despondent air.

She sighed and glanced at the handsome face beside her.

"He's too taken up with his business nowadays to worry himself much about me."

"To the exclusion of his charming wife! It would take more than business to come between me and my wife —if she were at all like you."

As he talked his hand rested on his companion's, and with a careful movement one of his strong gun-metal cuff-links was slipped through the safety chain of her bracelet.

"After they reach a certain age men think more of money than of women," she said with conviction.

"May I die before I reach that age!" he ejaculated passionately.

"But you are so different," she said, smiling at him in an infatuated manner.

At the far end of the big hall a band struck up.

"What a bore!" he exclaimed. "I'm engaged for this —a duty dance. I've a good mind to cut it and stay with you, Mrs. Green. Shall I?" he went on, smiling at her in an engaging, boyish fashion. "Say yes. Then if my partner comes down on me like a ton of bricks I can say 'The woman tempted me.'"

She gave him a coquettish slap.

"What a caution you are, Mr. Gilbert. You know I'm old enough to be your mother, yet I believe you're trying to flirt with me. And you have such a way of making a woman forget her years."

"And you have such a way of making a man forget his other partners," he replied. "But I suppose I'd better go and hunt her up," he finished, as if reluctant to leave her.

Yet he got to his feet quickly.

There was a sharp snap of something breaking, a little cry on the woman's part, a look of consternation on the man's.

"What a clumsy devil I am," he said apologetically. "My cuff-link must have caught in the safety-chain of your bracelet. You must let me take it to-morrow and have it mended for you."

"I shouldn't dream of troubling you," she answered. "It's really nothing at all."

"Hadn't you better take the bracelet off, considering the safety-chain is broken?" he asked, all solicitude.

"Oh, no, the clasp is perfectly secure. Now, you run along to your partner, and don't spoil your dance by worrying over a little thing like this," she finished, surveying the broken chain.

"Well, don't forget that eighteen is ours. I shan't know how to wait until then."

She gave him a little push.

"Oh, get along with you," she said.

As he walked away her faded eyes followed his handsome figure wistfully.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DANCE

That evening Wilson went into the central hall of his hotel to watch the people. Although he was fond of dancing, he made no attempt to join in. There were plenty of girls present, some of them pretty, all of them well dressed. Four days ago any one of them would have satisfied him, but he did not want to dance with them now. He only wanted that pale wraith of a girl—Désirée—to have her for his own, to dress her as these girls were dressed, to feed her up until she had some flesh on her bones, to make her look as a girl of twenty-one should look—gay and happy, not as if her life were one long tragedy.

In this frame of mind he prowled in and out of the columns surrounding the big hall.

Once he noticed the manager watching the crowded room anxiously, and for a moment his mind went to "The Triple Alliance."

Then he caught sight of a face that made him forget everything else.

Among the crowd of dancers he could have sworn he saw Désirée. But it was such a fleeting glimpse that he told himself he must be mistaken. Had she been coming to the ball she would have told him. She knew now the hotel at which he was staying.

When the dance was over, brief as the glimpse had

been, at the risk of making a nuisance of himself he prowled round the many alcoves and recesses.

In one of them he saw her with her uncle—Désirée, looking a picture of fragile, high-born loveliness, in a flounced white silk evening frock that, for all its fashionable cut, was probably the cheapest in the room.

The old Count and his niece were sitting with a clique of titled people whom Wilson recognized as the best set in the hotel.

On seeing him, the Count de Gilbert gave a casual nod in his direction. But Désirée took no notice at all!

"The cut direct" was not what Wilson had expected. He passed on, sorely wounded. He had not imagined the girl to be a snob—that she would ignore him because she happened to be with people of her own set. He put it down to her relatives. They had poisoned her mind against him. Very much to the fore in his own mind just then were the two words "no class" spoken in Eugene de Gilbert's sneering voice.

Although Wilson did not intrude on the aristocratic little coterie, he had no intention of letting Désirée go without a struggle.

With his powerful hands clenched he passed on. She had liked him until her uncle and cousin came along. She was such a child, so easily influenced, so afraid of her guardian. It was going to be a battle between himself and her highly-placed relatives—relatives who had left her to starve, and now were trying to come between her and a well-to-do man of "no class" who loved her and was only too ready to surround her with the luxuries and comforts they were too selfish to give.

Thus Wilson fumed to himself as he passed on from the alcove. However, he came to a halt not very far

from it, and took up his stand where he could watch the party without being seen himself.

Presently the band struck up again. The people with Désirée drifted off in ones and twos, leaving her alone with her uncle. Then, without a word, the Count followed in their wake.

The moment was one Wilson had been waiting for.

At once he went forward.

Désirée was sitting, as was her habit, with her hands lying listlessly on her knee, her eyes downcast, as if the gay world beyond the recess were something quite apart from her life.

The thick carpet muffled Wilson's step, and his approach did not make her raise her eyes.

"Don't say you're going to cut me a second time, Countess," he remarked with forced gayety.

At his voice she started visibly.

"Did I!" she exclaimed with dismay. "I—I never saw you. I'm very sorry. You know I wouldn't do a thing like that intentionally."

The reply satisfied him that the "cut" was accident, not design. Those beautiful blurred eyes were very short-sighted.

"You did," he said, smiling. "You looked straight at me, and never gave me a wink or nod."

At his words she colored, but she made no answer.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming here to-night?" he went on.

"I didn't know you would be here."

"But you heard me say I was staying at this hotel, didn't you?"

Her hands started to toy nervously with one of the flounces of her dress.

possessive grip, until there was no space left for nervous trembling.

There was a little recess close by, screened from the crowded room by a drooping palm. Into that Wilson drew his partner. Then he had both arms around her, straining her to his heart in a passionate embrace that brought a faint gasp to her lips.

That smothered cry, with its undercurrent of fear, made him relax his hold a little.

"You're not afraid of me, surely, my little one?" he whispered, watching with passionate gaze the sweet innocence that lay trembling but unresisting against his hard, clean strength.

"My uncle——"

"In England girls don't bother about what their uncles think and say; they just please themselves."

"But they are not like me," she said sadly.

It seemed to Wilson that she referred to her position and the restrictions it forced upon her, and he agreed with himself that the girls he knew in no way resembled the Countess de Mailly. They were not titled, they did not possess family trees that went back beyond the Crusades, or diamond necklaces worth tens of thousands of pounds that they would surrender with child-like trust into the hands of complete strangers.

"No, they're not like you, my little Countess," he said fondly. "They're none of them so sweet and unworldly, so innocent and lovely."

His arms tightened around her again until she was crushed against him, feeling, as he intended she should feel, all his strength and power.

"To-morrow when I come, Désirée, try to think only of what you want. Don't bother about your uncle.

Leave him to me. Don't you think I'm strong enough to tackle him?"

She lay weak as a baby in his grip, her heart beating wildly against his, her lips slightly parted, her vague eyes half-closed, a look of hope and wonder on her thin, tragic face.

Tenderly Wilson watched her as she lay, a lovely, delicate flower, upon his heart.

She was the last of her name, this fragile blossom of an ancient tree; he was the first of his name to attain place and power. With his own efforts, by sheer strength and force of character, he had raised himself from nothing until he was high enough to grasp at the Countess de Mailly, and hold on to her if only she said "Yes."

Much as Wilson wanted to lay his heart and soul at the girl's feet he desisted. He knew one of the first secrets of success is to do the right thing at the right moment.

This was not the moment to propose to Désirée. In two or three minutes at most, the dance would be over and he would have to take her back to her uncle. It was more than possible that to his proposal her upbringing and fear of her guardian would make her say "No." It might take more than the time he had on hand just at present to coax a frightened "Yes" to her lips. In either case she would go back to her relatives nervous and agitated. They would be sharp enough to guess what had happened, and would see to it that he and Désirée did not meet again.

If he left things until the morning he would have plenty of time on hand to coax her round to his way of thinking. With only Désirée to deal with there would be no great difficulty in gaining his end: Then he would come down

to Nice and interview her relatives—instead of delivering up the necklace, announcing the fact of Désirée's engagement. Whilst they were swallowing this piece of news he would motor with all speed back to the château, to be with her when they came along to dispute the matter, to stay with her until they either consented to the engagement, or——

If her uncle made a row and refused to sanction their marriage, well, he, Wilson, would use all the power he possessed, and persuade the girl to elope with him. If she were too afraid of her guardian to do that, there was still another course left open to him. Under the pretext of taking her for a drive he would entice her into his motor, and then run off with her. He was not going to let her go when it was so evident that she liked him, for, left to themselves, he could easily turn that liking into love.

Wildly as Wilson loved Désirée, he had no delusions about her feelings towards himself. It was a child's affection she had for him, not a woman's love. But if he were careful, on that affection he could soon build something stronger and deeper; and any man worthy of the name would be careful with a girl so high-strung and sensitive. To her, marriage would be purgatory unless it meant a union of mind and heart and soul as well as body.

Désirée's golden crown of hair just reached his lips. He kissed the soft coils—a phantom caress she could not feel.

There must be nothing but the best for her, this little girl whom he worshipped and adored. He would see to it that their marriage was no second-rate affair.

So Wilson's thoughts ran as he watched the little face

that in his arms lost its tragic look, and took on one of fleeting, furtive happiness.

He was in the grip of one of those sudden infatuations that seize men occasionally; that, if the object proves worthy, can settle down to the deep, steady love that lasts a lifetime. But now he was blind to everything except the beauty of the girl in his arms, the ideal he had waited for so long, and had been true to since baby days.

When the dance was over he took her back to the alcove.

Her uncle was there. With latent anger he scanned the couple. However, Wilson had his say first.

"I found the Countess all alone," he said pointedly, "so I took the liberty of looking after her."

"It was most kind of you," her uncle answered suavely. "I was called away unexpectedly. I shall not be leaving her alone again."

Wilson knew he was dismissed, with a hint not to venture in that direction again. He moved on towards the ballroom, and he moved in heaven. There was only one person there for him now—Désirée—Désirée, who had not reprimanded him when he had dared to call her by name, Désirée, who had lain, unresisting, against his heart, hope and wonder replacing the tragic note in her face.

To-morrow!

To-morrow his would be the right to call her Désirée for the rest of her life, to snap his fingers at her patronizing relatives, to keep "The Necklace of Tears" for his little wife to wear when she was dressed as he would dress her.

Thus Wilson's thoughts ran as he moved in his seventh heaven.

When Désirée was dancing his eyes never left her. Once she was with her uncle, generally she was with her cousin, occasionally with one or the other of the little coterie whose sacred precincts he had been forbidden to enter.

As the evening wore on he noticed her again dancing with her uncle. In the thick of the crowd they came into collision with her cousin, who was dancing with Mrs. Green. Wilson wondered what on earth Eugene was doing with his townswoman, and how the two had become acquainted, for she was even further removed from that aristocratic set than he himself was.

Just as they collided, he saw the Count de Gilbert let go of Désirée's hand. For a moment his hand rested on Mrs. Green's plump wrist. There was a little flash of something bright, then the couples parted. The whole thing was so screened by Désirée's figure that only Wilson, with eyes for no one but the girl, would have noticed it. The Count's hand went to his pocket. He drew out a handkerchief, blew his nose, and put it back again, once more taking his partner's hand.

It was all over in the space of half a minute. Wilson was too full of Désirée to put any meaning on what he had seen; in fact he was hardly conscious of having seen it.

It was one of those things that one sees and does not realize one has seen until a combination of circumstances brings it back to one's mind again.

CHAPTER XVIII

DISILLUSION

Almost as soon as the dance was over Désirée and her uncle left the ballroom. There was no mistaking the girl's graceful figure. What was more, she was wearing the pretty, fringed white cloak that appeared to be the only outdoor garment she possessed.

Having no further interest in what was happening, Wilson made his way to the manager's office for the smoke and gossip in which the two frequently indulged of an evening.

He had not been there very long when footsteps approached the room, and the sound of voices—a woman's tearful and anxious, a man's cultured and sympathetic.

"I wonder what has happened now?" the manager remarked. He was not long in finding out. A moment later the door opened, admitting Eugene de Gilbert and Mrs. Green.

"Some one must have taken it off my arm," she was insisting. "Deliberately stolen it. I know it was there when the dance started, because I remember looking at it."

The manager got to his feet and put down his cigar.

"Oh, Lord, 'The Triple Alliance' again," he said, *sotto voce,* to Wilson.

Then he turned his attention to Mrs. Green.

"What is it, madam? What has happened?"

"My bracelet! My diamond bracelet! Mr. Green gave £2,000 for it. It's gone. Oh, won't he be angry," she finished, tears running down her face.

"Perhaps the clasp came unfastened, and it has dropped somewhere in the ballroom," the manager suggested.

"It couldn't," she insisted hysterically. "It was much too firm. Some one has stolen it—stolen it off my very arm!"

"Besides, we've looked everywhere, under every chair and carpet," Eugene put in.

"Oh, you have been so kind, so sympathetic, so helpful," she said, turning to him.

"It's abominable that a lady can't come here without having her jewels stolen," Eugene broke in angrily.

Eugene had a great deal more to say, but Wilson did not hear it. He had suddenly stumbled on a truth that left him dumbfounded. Like a flash there came before him the little episode in the ballroom.

Mrs. Green had been Eugene de Gilbert's partner. They were the couple with whom Désirée and her uncle had collided. He remembered seeing the Count's hand on the woman's wrist, the brief flash of light that had followed, Désirée's screening figure, then her uncle's hand go to his pocket with the pretense of drawing out a handkerchief, but in reality to put the stolen bracelet there.

He remembered the girl had told him she had been in Cannes about six weeks ago. Just when the last robbery had taken place! And in America, where the nefarious trio had first been heard of.

There could be no mistake. *They* were "The Triple Alliance"—the Count de Gilbert, his son, and Désirée!

She was one of that dastardly trio. Désirée, the girl he loved—all three trading on their old names and high positions to keep suspicion from falling on them.

Wilson arose suddenly and left the office.

If the manager noticed his abrupt departure, it was to

think that his acquaintance deemed the situation one he, the manager, would prefer to deal with alone.

But Wilson wanted nothing but to get away from his own sort and the terrible truth that had dawned upon him.

He was scrupulously honest and upright. That the girl on whom he had set his heart should have proved a thief was positive torture to him.

What a hopeless, infatuated fool he had been!

He had fallen madly in love with a girl just because she was pretty, on a four days' acquaintance, endowing her with all the virtues.

Wilson writhed. He did not often make mistakes. That he should have made one now, in connection with the only woman he had ever loved, was agony past all bearing.

In mockery Désirée's innocent, wistful face rose up before him. Ghost-like her hands were on him, with their clinging, helpless touch. What could be more deceptive than her timid, hesitant ways? No one would suspect a girl who was outwardly so child-like and unworldly.

> A fool there was, and he made his prayer,
> Even as you or I,
> To a rag, a bone and a hank of hair. . . .

Jeeringly the words echoed through his brain.

He was that fool, idealizing a woman merely because she represented his idea of feminine beauty, assigning to her a crop of virtues she did not possess, too infatuated to see the mean soul beneath the lovely exterior.

She was a thief, this girl whom he had worshipped, giving her a reverence he had given to no woman before.

If there was one bright spot in his darkness, it was the fact that he had not declared himself, that he had not laid his heart and soul at the feet of that aristocratic thief.

CHAPTER XIX

THE QUARREL

Early the next morning the sound of an approaching motor roused Désirée as she sat at breakfast on the terrace, a breakfast that consisted of a cup of black coffee and a slice of a stale loaf.

She was expecting a visitor that morning, but not quite so early, for it was not much more than half-past eight. The sound brought a look of trembling resolve to her face. Her friend had been so nice the night before, so kind and gentle and strong, that she had made up her mind to confess everything. She would also tell him about Mr. Bassino, and ask him to try to save her from being compelled to marry a man she loathed.

After a sleepless night Wilson had risen early, and had driven over to what once had been his paradise, and was now a desert. He hardly knew why he had come. On retiring he had made up his mind to return to England the next day, but a force stronger than his own will created a desire to see the girl once again before he put her out of his life forever. And all the time he despised himself because she had such a hold on him.

His step on the terrace made Désirée get up with a little smile of welcome.

Wilson looked at her, wondering how a girl could appear so helpless and innocent, and yet be one of a trio of expert thieves.

There was no response to her words of greeting; no strong, careful grip on her hand; no firm, kind voice that was a caress in itself.

As the passing moments brought only silence, her smile died away, and a look of dismay crept over her face.

"What is it, *mon ami?*" she faltered presently.

"Oh, my God!" he burst out hoarsely. "You needn't trouble yourself any longer to act a part for my benefit. I've found out things for myself."

At his words she seemed to shrink, and with a little heartbroken cry her hands went to her face.

"You know," she moaned. "And now—you hate me."

"Did you imagine I could still love you, once I found out what you really were?"

There was no reply, but her hands remained before her face, as if to hide it from his view.

When Wilson was angry his words were few, but always to the point. They could hit and cut with a force and depth greater than any torrent of rage. And he was angry now—the cold, hard, merciless anger of the man who has been deceived in the woman he loves.

"No wonder the world has no use for an aristocracy, if you and your beautiful relatives represent it," he said with biting scorn. "No wonder France tried to make a clean sweep of hers."

Désirée's hands came from her face, and on it now were surprise, bewilderment, and a touch of hauteur.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said with trembling voice.

That she should stand there looking at him with such an air of injured innocence angered Wilson still further. That innocent, helpless way of hers had fooled even ***him***.

"A set of thieves and rogues, that's what you and your

uncle and cousin are, taking advantage of your position to victimize foolish women."

Désirée's drooping figure suddenly stiffened with dignity.

"Will you please explain exactly what you mean?" she asked quietly.

There was no anger in her voice, but its tone made Wilson feel as far below her socially as her set at the ball had intended him to feel.

That she could do this added to his rage, for he despised her utterly, and he despised himself too, because to him she was still Désirée—the one woman he desired.

"Don't pretend you don't know. I've found you out. And I know now that you and your uncle and cousin are 'The Triple Alliance,' that dastardly set of jewel thieves. I saw your cousin dancing with Mrs. Green. I saw you and your uncle collide with them, a collision your cousin helped to bring about. I saw your uncle take the bracelet from her wrist, and you shielding him—seeing it done and saying nothing, helping them in their vile thieving."

As he talked, an incredulous expression passed over the girl's face. She put out a hand to stop him. Slowly she backed, as if to try to escape from what he was saying, as though his words were raining on her like blows. By the time he had finished speaking all color had faded from her face. She looked frozen by the facts he had put before her.

"How can I do any of the dreadful things you say?" she gasped, in a voice that had lost all its soft music. "How can I know what goes on around me when—I am blind!"

As she said the last three words she turned quickly, and ran towards the house; in her haste to escape, crash-

ing her forehead against the portal of the door. With a little cry of pain she flew on, leaving Wilson staring after her, aghast.

At that moment his world was as dark as Désirée's.

Those three final words of hers left him rooted to the spot.

He had heaped abuse and insults on a girl who had no idea of what went on around her; who was the unconscious tool of two scoundrels.

"I am blind."

Why had he not guessed it? How could he have been so stupid? Why had it not occurred to him that, although she said "I hear," or "feel," or "smell," never by any chance did she say "I see"; that he had never seen her reading, or writing, or sewing; only knitting? To anyone in his senses her phenomenal ignorance, her unworldliness, her babyish looks and old-fashioned ways, would have given the key to the tragedy that brooded over her life.

Wilson knew he had not been in his senses where Désirée was concerned.

He had been blind too—blindly infatuated, too blind to realize that her helplessness was something more than normal.

Common sense, an attribute that had passed from him since his discovery of the previous evening, came back with a sudden rush.

Would she have told him she had been in America and Cannes had she had any idea of what had been happening in those places? Would she have entrusted 'The Necklace of Tears' into his keeping?

My God! What had he done?

Wilson's hand went across his anguished eyes.

He had hurt and insulted a helpless, neglected, sightless child who had been left to the mercy of a couple of scoundrels.

"I'm quite used to being alone in the dark."

Those words of hers, spoken in a soft, sad voice, rose up and confronted him.

He groaned.

She was alone in the dark now, somewhere in the old château—alone with his cruel words, the little girl he loved.

For her harrowing confession had not swept away his love. It had made it all the deeper.

In his ears rang that agonized little voice. Before his eyes were the small, thin hands hiding her stricken face from his view.

"You know, and now you hate me."

Hate her because she was blind? Then she did not know the sort of man with whom she was dealing.

The crashing blow she had struck herself in her wild desire to escape from him and his insults filled his black world with sickening echoes.

He was responsible for that too—he, in his thoughtless anger, a fool who could not put two and two together.

The cup of black coffee and slice of dry bread met his gaze, mocking him with their tale of patient, brave endurance, telling him anew of the depths of his own stupidity and the girl's innocence.

She had no share in the ill-gotten gains, except, perhaps, now and again the one frock she must have in which to play her part.

Quickly he turned into the house, his only desire to find the girl, to take her into his arms and whisper words of love and comfort.

He went into the dining-room, but there was no sign of her there. He passed out again into the hall, and opened all the doors that led into it, looking into empty, crumbling chambers with broken windows, falling ceilings, and damp, peeling walls, but Désirée was not in any one of them.

He went upstairs, into room after room, still looking for the girl "alone in the dark."

Finally he reached a door that was locked, and from the other side came the sound of hopeless, heart-broken sobbing—Désirée weeping because of the insults and the hideous accusations he had so suddenly poured upon her.

He knocked, but there was no answer.

"Désirée, you must let me in," he called, in a voice that was hoarse with agony.

But he had no answer, except that the sobs grew more choked and stifled.

Those tears from blind eyes—tears of his making—fell like liquid fire upon his heart.

"You *must* let me in," he called again. "I *must* see you. I'd no idea you didn't know—that you couldn't see what went on around you."

Still there was no response.

Beside himself, Wilson put his shoulder to the door, to try to burst it open, in his mind nothing but a desire to reach the girl and kiss away her tears.

But the door was of thick oak and iron. It resisted the force he brought against it, and the only result of his efforts was a severely bruised shoulder.

Then Wilson came to his senses.

He could not force his way into a girl's bedroom.

Close by was a wide window-seat, in one of the

stained-glass windows of the corridor. On that he seated himself, waiting until Désirée should appear.

Time passed, but the door did not open.

Somewhere in the silent château an old clock whirred and buzzed and then struck nine, filling the place with its echoes.

It struck half-past nine, and then ten, and still the door showed no signs of opening. But the sobs had died away. Behind the thick door all was silent—the silence of intense suffering.

Again Wilson went to the door and knocked.

"Désirée, you must let me see you. I insist. Only for a moment. I must explain things to you," he called frantically.

If possible the silence was greater than ever.

With a gesture of pain and despair he turned away.

He would go back to Nice and have it out with those two scoundrels. They were coming for the necklace at eleven o'clock.

When he had settled with them he would come back to Désirée.

CHAPTER XX

MISUNDERSTOOD

Désirée's dark world was whirling round her when she turned and fled from Wilson—a world that held nothing but his voice as she had never heard it before—harsh, cold, and angry, saying things she could not believe. Then into the whirl had come a sudden crash of pain.

Although it brought a cry to her lips, it also brought a little order into the chaos, and it made her realize what she really wanted—to escape from the one friend of her own choosing, from the man who had come into her darkness, bringing with him a sense of perfect trust and security.

Désirée felt her affliction deeply. She had never seen the daylight. The world to her was a thick gray fog, in which dark shadows moved vaguely. A sense of having been robbed of her heritage of sight was always with her, and a feeling that God had never intended that she should go about and not see the things of His creating.

All her life she had felt an outcast, an object of scorn and pity among her fellows. The fact of her blindness filled her with morbid shame, as if it were some crime she herself had committed. And her uncle and cousin had always impressed on her that she was cursed because of the necklace.

She knew she had deceived Wilson. On their first meeting he had not guessed. Afterwards she had been afraid to tell him, lest he should turn from her. When

he was with her, her whole energies were concentrated on keeping the fact of her blindness from him, and she had managed to circumvent her lack of sight so deftly that anyone with her in her own home and only for a short time might not have guessed her affliction.

But she had made up her mind to confess. She had confessed. But not in the way she had intended. The confession had been wrung from her in agony, by the incredible facts so unexpectedly put before her.

She never thought of Wilson as a lover. To her a lover was a person like Bassino, who had come into her darkness, breathing on her heavily with foul breath, puffing cigar smoke into her face, touching her with hot and greedy hands.

Wilson was put into the same category as Juliette and Pierre, both people she loved and trusted—someone who was always kind and gentle, who looked after her, and touched her with careful hands; yet who had brought such a feeling of strength and power with him that the wild hope had grown up within her that he might prove a savior powerful enough to set aside her uncle's decree, and save her from Mr. Bassino.

At that moment, far worse than her affliction, worse even than the prospect of her marriage, was her one friend's anger. She could not believe what he said about her uncle and cousin, yet, because he said it, she felt it must be true.

The appalling facts which Wilson had stated, and a desire to escape from him, were the two things that filled her mind as she crossed the big hall and went up the wide staircase to her bedroom, with the unerring instinct that came of a lifetime spent in finding her way about the old château and its grounds.

On reaching her room she locked the heavy door. Then she threw herself on the bed, and remained there sobbing in a heart-broken fashion.

So little had come into her dark, untaught life that she never forgot any incident connected with the few things that had come into it.

Juliette had always disliked her uncle and cousin. Although she, herself, had tried to think she liked them, in her heart of hearts she had always known she did not. In the days of her childhood they were nearly as poor as she was. Then they used to come and stay for months on end at the château, forever grumbling at the meager fare the place provided.

At the first rumor of war Eugene and her uncle had gone to America. When she was eighteen her uncle had come for her.

She went over the two miserable years she had spent in America.

There were times when they seemed to have quite a lot of money; times when she was left alone in cheap lodging-houses at the mercy of landladies, and her uncle and Eugene lived at expensive hotels. Occasionally they took her to parties. Every now and again she had a new silk evening frock, quite different from the dresses Juliette had always made for her.

Vividly there came back to her the very words Eugene had once said after one of the parties.

"It's a damned good thing that Cissy is dead. Now it's a case of half, not a third, and I don't have to be forever propitiating her."

Perhaps about once every two months she was taken to a party. Invariably during the evening, when she was dancing with her uncle, there would be a collision, and

Eugene's voice apologizing, her uncle letting go her hand, and a moment later his voice would say:

"Désirée, I need my handkerchief."

He would blow his nose, then the dance went on, but immediately it was over she and her uncle left.

Sometimes, when the three of them were alone together, Eugene would make jokes about bracelets, laughing in his cruel, taunting way when her uncle reprimanded him.

"Oh, Désirée doesn't understand," he would say.

What was it she did not understand?

That she was the dupe and tool of two highly-placed jewel thieves, who had taken her as their third when their woman confederate had died.

She understood now, and the realization was purgatory.

She had been so proud of her old name. There was so little else she had had of which to be proud.

Into Désirée's chaotic world came the sound of some one knocking at her door, and her friend's voice calling her.

She buried her face deeper in the pillows and tried to stifle her sobs.

She would rather have been tortured to death than have gone and faced him with her sightless eyes and disgraced name.

But the fact that he had followed her told her she must escape still further, where he could not possibly reach her.

Worn out with weeping, she lay on the bed listening, some sense within her telling her he was still outside, the friend she dared not face.

There was another knock and call, but she did not answer. She only wanted him to go away at once, and never come into her disgraced life again.

Presently she heard his step along the corridor. A few moments later there was the sound of a motor going down the drive.

Once certain he was gone, Désirée got up. With trembling fingers she unlocked the heavy door and made her way downstairs to the kitchen.

At her entry Juliette threw up her hands.

"*Mon Dieu!* What has happened?" she cried, as she surveyed the girl's tear-stained face, her bruised forehead, and tumbled hair.

Désirée did not wait to explain matters.

"I must go away from here at once—where nobody can find me."

"What is it? What has that Englishman been saying?"

However, Désirée avoided the question.

"I want to go away," she said with insistence.

"Where can you go, Comtesse? We have no money for whims nowadays."

"Let me go to your daughter, Marie, at Eze. Nobody will look for me there. Oh, Juliette, don't make me stay here," she finished, the helpless tears starting to fall again.

"Come, come, *ma petite,* there must be no crying," the old woman said fondly. "Of course you shall go to Marie if you want to. I'll borrow Mère Toinet's mule cart and we'll start at once."

As Juliette made her way towards a neighboring farm she decided there had been some quarrel between the English monsieur and "them" over the Countess Désirée. It would be just as well to get the girl out of the way until her rich fiancé arrived. Then she would tell him where the Comtesse was, and leave him to deal with the situation.

CHAPTER XXI

THE INTERVIEW

On reaching his hotel Wilson went into the large hall. He chose a quiet corner, out of earshot of the rest of the room, and there awaited his visitors.

The Gilberts were not late. The last stroke of eleven had barely died away when they appeared.

Leisurely they made their way in his direction, greeting an acquaintance here and there.

At their entry Wilson arose. He stood with his back half turned towards them, his right hand deep in his pocket, while with the other he carelessly turned over some newspapers on the table at his side. He did not appear to notice the couple until they paused beside him, nor did he respond to their greeting, or take either of the hands held towards him.

"We've come to relieve you of the responsibility of the necklace," the old Count said affably.

"I don't intend to give it up just yet," Wilson replied.

The Gilberts glanced at one another.

"What did I tell you, *mon père?*" Eugene said in an undertone. "We're not out of the woods yet."

"You must return the necklace at once," the Count said haughtily, his voice dry with anxiety. "It's my niece's property."

"So I understand," Wilson answered. "That's why I don't intend to let you have it."

There was no mistaking the contempt and animosity in his voice.

Elbowing his father aside, Eugene stepped forward.

"So you're going to try to stick to the necklace you inveigled out of my cousin in her guardian's absence?" he remarked in a threatening manner.

"No, I don't know that that's my idea exactly," Wilson answered slowly, "but I've no intention of giving it to a couple of rogues like you and your father."

"Rogues!" the older man spluttered. "Rogues!"

"Thieves, then, if you think that word describes you better."

The Count's face blanched.

"Considering the hue and cry after Mrs. Green's bracelet disappeared," Wilson went on, "I'm surprised you dare show your faces here to-day. I saw you take her bracelet, and I saw how the whole thing was engineered, too. I saw you use a blind girl for your dupe and shield —a helpless child who had no idea what she was doing. You couple of scoundrels!"

There was a brief, tense pause.

The old Count glanced round quickly, his whole figure shaking. But Eugene laughed, as if with intense amusement.

"My good man, you must be drunk," he drawled. "Lots of you English do start drinking whisky before breakfast."

It had come—the "my good man" that Wilson had been expecting since meeting the Gilberts. Once he had imagined it would cut him to the quick, coming from the lips of a relative of the girl he loved. Now it seemed to him he would rather be a "good man" than like either of the polished knaves confronting him.

"At any rate I'm sober enough not to give the Countess de Mailly's necklace to either of you."

"If we are responsible for the disappearance of Mrs. Green's bracelet, as you seem to insinuate," Eugene went on with an unperturbed air, "why didn't you say so last night? You were in the manager's office when I brought her there to make the complaint."

"I'd no intention of dragging your cousin's name into the affair," Wilson answered.

This was not quite true. At the actual time he had been too dumbfounded at what he had imagined to be Désirée's unveiling to be able to say a word. Now nothing would have induced him to mention the affair to an outsider. Her name was almost as sacred to him as herself, and he intended to defend it, even if it meant the Gilberts going scot free.

Eugene saw an excellent reason for Wilson's silence, one he was quick to take advantage of.

"Come; we've had enough of this nonsense, Wilson," he said in a sharp, superior tone. "To use an English expression, you'll understand 'it won't wash.' You're trying to find an excuse for keeping the necklace, and you think you have one in accusing us of taking Mrs. Green's bracelet. In fact, blackmail would be about the right name for your proceedings."

"Call it what you like," Wilson replied evenly. "But, whatever you call it, I intend to keep the necklace."

There was a moment's silence.

Both the Gilberts saw they were safe in the shelter of a girl's skirts, and they meant to make the most of their refuge.

"You damned scoundrel," the Count burst out, "taking

advantage of a blind child's trust to rob her of her heritage."

Wilson's right hand came from his pocket in a clenched, ominous manner, and he took a step in their direction, his chin thrust slightly forward, in the way he had done in past days when his school-fellows had twitted him about the "sun and moon."

"Look here," he said, "if you start calling me names I shall get angry. And when I get angry I make a row. Then the whole place will hear what we're talking about."

He was maligning himself. When he was angry he was quiet. He had been quiet with the two confederates—so quiet that they were beginning to think it was safe to bully him, in spite of his knowledge of their doings.

However, the threat kept further abuse from their lips.

There was another and further pause, which Eugene broke.

"If you don't let me have my cousin's necklace at once I shall inform the police."

"All right," Wilson said coolly.

It was now a game of bluff. Wilson knew he had no right to the necklace, except the right of the strong to defend the weak. And Eugene de Gilbert had every right to call in the police, since he, Wilson, had refused to give up Désirée's belongings. Wilson also knew that if the police came he would have to give a reason for having kept the necklace, and he could not do that without Désirée being branded as one of "The Triple Alliance."

But he knew, too, that the Gilberts would not be any too anxious for police interference.

Another pause ensued.

This time Wilson broke the silence.

"I think we understand each other fairly well," he said. "I'm not going to let you rob the Countess de Mailly as you have robbed dozens of other people. I'm keeping the necklace, since both it and she need better guardians than you two beauties."

With this Wilson walked away, leaving the Gilberts staring after him.

CHAPTER XXII

SCHEMES

In unenviable frames of mind, the Count de Gilbert and Eugene went back to their hotel. A thoughtful silence enveloped them until they reached their own quarters. They were not staying at a palatial place like Wilson's; at the moment the funds did not permit of it. They had a *chambre meublée* in a third-rate hotel, and for lunch and dinner they patronized more fashionable resorts.

Once within the shelter of their own room the Count let himself go. The beds were still unmade; a débris of coffee, rolls, and cigarette ends lay upon a small table. Surveying the chaos, he paced up and down, swearing profusely.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he raved. "I thought we'd done with this life once and forever. These ups and downs, this constant anxiety—I tell you my nerve is going. I can't stand much more. There's an end to everybody's luck. And now this damned Englishman has found us out."

"I've often told you, *mon père,* that curses never do any good," Eugene responded equably. "It's far better to smile in the teeth of Fate."

"Smile? Yes, that's all you can do," his father snapped. "Smile, and leave me to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for you."

"*Mon cher,* if our years were reversed I'd have to do

the pulling and you the enchanting. You're past an age that attracts elderly women. They prefer men young enough to be their sons. So I have to do the 'fatal fascination' act, much as I prefer the *jeunes filles*. Generally speaking, young girls haven't jewelry worthy of our attention. When a woman loses her youth she tries to blind men's eyes to the fact by the glitter of her diamonds."

So saying, Eugene picked a cigarette out of a box that lay open on the table. Then he threw himself down in a deep chair. It creaked ominously as he leaned back, so he got up and pushed it close against the wall for support.

"It has a weak back," he remarked. "I must deal with it tenderly."

His indifferent attitude roused his father still further.

"You and your accursed jokes!" he snarled. "And a fortune in that damned Englishman's keeping. Will you never take things seriously?"

"What's the use of being alive if one has to be serious about it? I'm a butterfly. I neither toil nor spin. Or perhaps I'm a lily of the field—whichever it is. In any case I'm something that never has and never intends to work for a living. I'm not an honest plodder like our friend Wilson."

"Curse him," the Count muttered. "We're entirely in his hands."

"Wilson won't give us away," Eugene responded easily, as he lighted his cigarette. "He's much too infatuated with Désirée for that. I wronged him in the first act. It's the girl he wants, not the necklace. And through her, if we're sharp, we may still get it."

The older man stopped his nervous pacing.

"Explain yourself," he said abruptly.

"We must remove Désirée from within his reach, and

then bargain with him. Tell him he can have whichever he likes, either the necklace or the girl. And tell him he'll have to make up his mind pretty quickly too, or we'll marry her to Bassino. He'll be here any day now. He won't waste time, that Dago, where Désirée is concerned."

In front of his son the old Count did a dance, begotten of excitement and relief.

"The very thing, Eugene!" he cried. "The very thing!"

"We must get Désirée away at once," his son continued, "before Wilson gets hold of her. I tell you he's not the sort that lets grass grow under his feet."

"Leisurely Eugene got up and went towards the door.

"In ten minutes, *mon père*, I shall be round with the car," he finished.

During the drive from Nice to the old château neither father nor son saw much of the beauty of their surroundings. They were too intent on arranging where they would take Désirée.

"Some little village in the mountains," was Eugene's suggestion. "And you must stay with her. It won't be a gay life for you, but you must keep your mind fixed on the necklace. I'll stay in Nice and do the bargaining with Wilson. Once he's seen Bassino I don't think he'll be long in making up his mind—not if he's the man I take him for."

On reaching the old château they found it empty. Although the front door stood open, no amount of shouting produced either Désirée or Juliette, nor was there any sign of the dog.

At the moment the fact did not alarm them. Juliette was frequently at the neighboring farms selling produce, and Désirée and her four-footed guardian might be out for a walk, or somewhere in the tangled garden.

They went into the garden, but neither shouts nor searching brought any sign of the girl.

Their commotion brought old Pierre lumbering up from one of the terraces beyond the wall, where he was digging.

"Where's your mistress?" Eugene demanded when the old man appeared.

"Isn't mademoiselle in the house, monsieur?"

"No; neither she nor Juliette. And they're not in the grounds either."

"Then they must have gone out," Pierre said.

"You old fool, of course they've gone out. Isn't that what we're telling you?" the Count broke in. "What we want to know is, where have they gone?"

"How do I know?" the old servant mumbled. "They don't tell me where they're going every time they go out. In any case they'll be back soon. It's the hour for *déjeuner.*"

With this the Gilberts had to be content.

They retraced their steps to the terrace and seated themselves there, momentarily expecting Désirée.

Presently, in the house, the old clock struck one, reminding them that the hour for *déjeuner* was well past, and that they themselves had not lunched, a fact that Désirée's unlooked-for absence had taken from them.

Life had made the Count de Gilbert and his son quite capable of waiting on themselves when necessary. They raided the château's meager larder, lunching on boiled eggs, sardines, dry bread, fruit, and a bottle of old wine from the cellars.

Afterwards they sat smoking, awaiting the truant's return.

The clock struck two and then three; still there was no sign of Désirée, nor of Juliette, nor of the dog.

As time passed, a gray look crept over the Count's face, and Eugene grew thoughtful.

It appeared that Wilson had forestalled them and gone off with their hostage. And "The Necklace of Tears" seemed as far away as ever.

CHAPTER XXIII

WILSON'S REMORSE

After his interview with the Gilberts, Wilson's one desire was to get back to Désirée there and then. However, he deemed it wiser to postpone his visit until the afternoon, and give the girl time to recover.

It was nearly five o'clock before his motor drew up under the terrace of the château.

He saw Juliette making her way towards the back premises. At once he was out of the car and following her.

"La Comtesse de Mailly?" he asked.

Usually this brief interrogation sent Juliette's skinny brown finger pointing in whichever direction Désirée happened to be. On this occasion her hands remained at her side, and she shook her head.

But Wilson was not so easily turned from his purpose.

"Où est mademoiselle?" he asked slowly, in his best French.

"Mademoiselle la Comtesse est partie," Juliette answered promptly.

The news of her departure was a shock to Wilson. In French he managed to ask where she had gone, but the old woman either could not or would not understand him.

Frantic at the thought of Désirée "alone in the dark," he made his way into the château. For a second time that day he looked into its moldering rooms, his foot-

steps echoing in the forlorn old ruin as if he were walking in the tomb of his dead hopes.

On going upstairs, he found the door which had been locked in the morning now standing slightly ajar.

With a feeling of treading on sacred ground, Wilson entered.

He surveyed the poor room, with its bare tiled floor, damp, stained ceiling, and lack of all comfort, and thought of his own luxurious chamber. There was a little hollow in the narrow iron bed, with its patched and darned quilt, where Désirée had lain when she wept her heart out, and he was nearer tears at that moment than ever he had been in his adult life, for he knew he was responsible for hers.

Then he looked for some clue to the fugitive's whereabouts.

There was no wardrobe in the room, only a piece of well-washed and faded cretonne hanging across one corner. Behind that he peeped.

Wilson knew every one of the few clothes in which he had seen Désirée. There was no sign of the blue muslin dress, or the white one with the narrow piping of red, or the pretty, white, fringed cloak, or the little hat with the cherries, that in some marvelous manner had been ironed out and retrimmed so that it looked none the worse for its drenching. There was only the white silk dress she had worn at the ball.

He looked into the drawers of a lopsided chest that stood against one of the walls. They had been rummaged into hurriedly, and apparently one or two garments from each of the little piles of pretty underclothes had been taken.

With careful fingers Wilson touched them. There was no doubt about it; she had flown from him—his fairy

princess—away from him and his cruel words, for his investigations showed she intended to stay away some time, and was not returning that evening, as he had been trying to make himself believe.

If he wanted further proof of the girl's innocence, he had it now. She had gone, leaving him in possession of "The Necklace of Tears." But he did not want any further proof; he only wanted Désirée.

Common sense told him she could not have gone far. She had next to no money, no motor-car, and there were practically no trains running. She could not get farther than horse or mule could take her; surely only a few miles away.

Wilson turned to the window and studied the view thoughtfully.

Up from the tangled garden came the faint murmur of insects; a soft scented breeze wafted in at the open lattice; every now and again a goat bell tinkled. The peace of it all mocked him.

He was responsible for her flight; he, in his stupidity; a clumsy fool who, in his anger, would not believe in the innocence which stamped that little face, but must go and pour vile accusations on a sensitive, high-strung girl.

Whatever he did, whatever sacrifice he made, he could never make up to her for his fatal error.

With tortured eyes he studied the landscape. It seemed to him the folded hills and valleys were endless. In any one of them Désirée might be hidden, in any one of the tiny farms in the secluded valleys, in any one of the little homesteads dotted on the hills. It might take weeks to find her.

In spite of the pain he was feeling, Wilson did not waste time in useless lamentations.

He had but one idea now—to find Désirée.

His lack of French would make the feat almost impossible for him alone. He would go back to Nice at once and engage an interpreter. Then he would start a systematic search.

He was on his way back to Nice before it occurred to him that Désirée might be farther away than he imagined. Her uncle and cousin might have carried her off in their big racing car, in order to use her as a means of getting hold of the necklace. They were quite equal to it, and quite sharp enough to guess the reason of his silence.

This idea added to his depression. Désirée left to herself would be much easier to get hold of than Désirée in the hands of the Gilberts.

To Wilson's surprise, on arriving at his hotel he found the father and son awaiting him in the hall, and about them both was an air of righteous indignation.

Before he had time to speak they had accosted him.

"I can put up with you stealing my niece's necklace," the old Count spluttered angrily, "but I refuse to let you abduct my niece as well."

"Abduct your niece!" Wilson repeated, for the moment nonplussed.

"Yes, abduct my niece. The Countess is not in her home. What have you done with her?"

"Oh, so that's it, is it?" Wilson said with a relieved air. "As a matter of fact, I was going to ask you the same question."

His words left the two staring at each other.

Then suddenly it dawned on all three of them that Désirée herself was responsible for her flight, and that, as far as the girl was concerned, the game was still even.

CHAPTER XXIV

MANUEL BASSINO ARRIVES

Three days after Désirée's flight the château had another visitor. He came in style, in a most expensive and showy motor-car, with a chauffeur and footman. He wore a sable coat. There were diamonds in his tie and on his fingers, and he smoked a long cigar. With an air of having bought the place and all in it, he walked up to the front door and knocked in a loud and aggressive manner.

When Juliette appeared he said in English, with a strong American accent:

"I want to see the Countess de Mailly."

Not understanding what he said, Juliette shook her head; then he shouted the sentence at her. And as she still failed to comprehend, he yelled again still louder. Finally it dawned on him that she did not know what he was talking about, and since he knew no French he hailed the chauffeur to come and act as an interpreter.

The old woman gathered that the gross, aggressive man before her was the Countess de Mailly's fiancé. Until now she had been delighted at the thought of the rich *parti* who had fallen to her mistress's lot. At this moment she understood the girl's dread and hatred of him.

And Juliette's thoughts ran thus: When she was a young girl, she would not have liked to have had to marry this monsieur from South America, no matter how rich he might be. And she was only a peasant, not a high-born lady like the Comtesse Désirée.

The English monsieur was infinitely preferable, although he had no sable coat, no shiny top hat, no big cigar, no diamonds, no chauffeur, no footman, only a very plain and serviceable car that he drove himself, and was only a plain, ordinary sort of man of whom it was impossible to say whether he had money or not. If he were rich he did not have the fact branded on himself and all his belongings like this Monsieur Bassino.

Juliette was determined not to tell him the Comtesse's whereabouts. Things could be left to work out their own salvation. She was not going to interfere in any way.

Having made up her mind to this, the old servant disclaimed all knowledge of the girl's whereabouts.

"But she lives here, doesn't she?" Bassino asked through his interpreter.

She had lived there until three days ago, when she had gone away and no one knew where she had gone, he learned.

In front of Juliette Bassino raged and swore. But she watched him indifferently, persisting to the chauffeur that the Countess de Mailly had gone away and no one knew where she had gone.

"Ask the old hag if she knows where the Count de Gilbert is?" Bassino asked at length.

Oh, yes, she could tell him that. And she gave the address of an obscure hotel in Nice.

There, in a towering rage and in all his glory, Bassino went.

On reaching the hotel he heard that both the Count and his son were out. What was more, they were not likely to be back until eight or nine that evening, and nobody knew where they were at the moment.

There was nothing Bassino could do but wait. He

retired to his hotel, the best in Nice, where he had a whole suite of apartments. In an elaborate sitting-room, where he had hoped to bring Désirée as his wife in the course of a few days, he sat gnawing his thumb and brooding over her unexpected disappearance.

At eight o'clock, in no very enviable frame of mind, he went round to interview the Count de Gilbert. He had paid fifty thousand dollars for his "little thoroughbred," not counting the oddments those two blood-suckers had had out of him, and now the goods were not there according to contract.

In a towering rage he entered the Gilberts' shabby quarters.

They greeted him and his temper with the air of men too obsessed with their own affairs to give a thought to the outside world.

"Where's Désirée?" he demanded angrily, the moment he got into the room.

Eugene shrugged his shoulders.

"Ask me another," he said.

"I've given fifty thousand dollars for her, and don't you forget it," the Brazilian blustered.

"And I'd give another fifty thousand to have her in my hands at this moment," the Count informed him.

"Where's she gone?" Bassino bawled.

"Hang it, man, we're not deaf," Eugene said with unusual irritability.

"What has happened to my fiancé?"

"That's exactly what we want to know."

The evening of Désirée's disappearance the Gilberts had returned to the château to find Juliette back at her post again. On questioning her as to the girl's whereabouts, she had said she had no idea where her mistress

was. She had explained her absence on their last visit by saying she had missed the Comtesse, and had spent the morning and afternoon searching for her. Then her lips closed over her toothless gums in a thin. hard, determined line, in a manner that indicated that, whatever anyone might say, they would get nothing more out of her.

The father and son had not wasted time over Juliette. Never having interested themselves in the old woman's affairs, they did not even know she had a daughter, let alone one at Eze.

At once they had set about a systematic search for Désirée, and that evening again had returned to Nice disappointed.

"You've gone back on me, you couple of sharpers! You've sold Désirée to someone else," Bassino cried, beside himself with fear and rage and balked passion.

"No, we haven't," Eugene answered. "She went away of her own accord."

"Went away! What do you mean by letting her go?"

"We didn't let her go. She ran away. We've spent the last three days in hunting for her," the Count explained.

"What made her run away?" the Brazilian asked in a calmer tone.

Eugene's eyes rested superciliously on the gross figure before him.

"I suspect the idea of you, and the fact that she has fallen in love with some Englishman. You're a bitter pill for any well-bred girl to swallow, even though you're so well gilded," he finished, with no respect for the millionaire's feelings.

Bassino did not hear the insult to himself. He only saw Désirée lost to him.

"Eloped? Married?" he shrieked.

"No. This Englishman is looking for her as well, damn him! And if he finds her it's all up with you. He's as mad for her as you are."

Bassino turned towards the elder Gilbert.

"You're her guardian. You can make her marry me," he said, anxiety and pain in his thick voice.

With only Désirée to deal with the Count knew he could make her do anything he wanted. But if she happened to have reached the shelter of Wilson's broad back before they discovered her whereabouts, that would be quite another matter.

"I could, if I can find her," he answered.

"Of course you can find her," Bassino answered briskly, suddenly buoyed up by the thought of the power of money. "I'll find her, if it costs me another fifty thousand dollars. Who is this Englishman she's got a fancy for? I'll travel double quick and let him know he's got to let my property alone."

However, the Gilberts disclaimed all knowledge of Wilson's name and address. If the Englishman and Bassino had words over Désirée, there was a chance that the fact of "The Triple Alliance" might slip out, and the risk was one they were not going to run.

"I don't know who he is. I only know there is such a person," the Count answered. "And the best thing you can do is to join forces with us, and help us to search for Désirée."

By this method the Count de Gilbert saw unlimited means at his disposal. But once the girl was found, Wilson, not Bassino, should have her, provided he handed over "The Necklace of Tears."

CHAPTER XXV

DÉSIRÉE'S NEW HOME

Each day, from eight in the morning until it was dark, Wilson scoured the country round Nice trying to find some clew to Désirée's whereabouts. Often he would leave his car at a tiny wayside farm, and with his interpreter tramp along rough mountain tracks and plunge into deep, secluded valleys, visiting lonely homesteads set far away from the world.

Most of the little farms had heard of the young *chatelaine*. She was very beautiful, but blind, *"la pauvre mignonne."* Occasionally one met her walking on the roads with her wolf dog. She lived at the Domaine de Mailly, two, four, or ten kilometers away, as the case might be. All her life she had lived there with a couple of old servants, except when she was in America with her uncle.

At first when the peasants started this rigamarole Wilson's hopes would rise.

But she had left her home, he would explain through his interpreter. Did they know where she had gone?

Then they would shrug their shoulders.

How could they know where she had gone? Who could account for the sudden whims and caprices of the aristocracy?

And this was all Wilson had gathered by lunch-time on the fifth day.

Sometimes, as he walked along the stony tracks, he would close his eyes for a moment to see what the world was like to Désirée. A world of night, of ghastly loneliness, which he knew he had made even blacker.

Once he met the Gilberts, undoubtedly on the same errand as himself. The two search-parties vouchsafed one another no acknowledgment beyond scowls.

One day after lunch, as he wandered down one of the cobbled streets of a remote village, a dusty postcard in a tiny shop caught his attention. It was a picture of a walled village, standing high above the sea on a great jutting spur of mountain—a view of Eze.

As Wilson looked at it, there flashed into his mind a remark of Désirée's, made on the occasion when he had taken her for a motor drive to Monte Carlo: "Juliette has a married daughter living there."

He stared at the postcard, brooding on that day. No wonder Désirée had refused his invitation to lunch. No wonder she had insisted on Juliette coming with her. No wonder she would not go into the hotel with him and have tea. But the greatest wonder of all was how he could have been such a fool as not to have guessed her infirmity.

Wilson made his way quickly back to the little café where he had lunched, still marveling on how the girl had managed to deceive him. But he had attributed her one or two little blunders to short-sightedness and excessive nervousness.

He disturbed the interpreter in the midst of a comfortable smoke and flirtation with the café waitress, and before many minutes had passed they were driving as fast as they could go in the direction of Eze.

An hour later the place came into view.

For the sake of quickness they had come by the road that skirted the sea. Then they turned and crawled upwards, pursuing a narrow, twisted way, up and up, until the sea lay far below and the gray mountains rose like a wall ahead of them, halting when the motor could get no further and the village towered above them like an old fort, grim and gray against the blue sky, with its ruined castle high above everything.

Leaving the car, they went up a steep track leading towards the one gate in the crumbling stone wall that gave access to the place, and on through a dark, tunnel-like entrance.

At certain hours of the day, when the children are at school, and the adults are working in the fields and vineyards on the adjacent mountains, one can walk from end to end of Eze without meeting a person.

It seemed to Wilson that he had alighted upon a deserted village.

They passed out of the arch into a weed-grown square. Ahead were twisted, tortuous streets, none of them much more than a yard wide, that went up and down according to the incline of the rock. In several places the houses met across the passage-like streets, looking as if they would have fallen if they had not had a neighbor to lean on.

Up one of the shadowed, narrow ways they started. There did not appear to be a soul in the place. All the little windows were shuttered, all the doors closed. They went up one passage and down another. Fowls and goats wandered at will about the place, scratching and browsing among the weeds that grew between the cobbled ways—ways that had a narrow streak of red bricks running up the middle of them to mark them as public thoroughfares.

Occasionally the encircling wall was reached. In parts the rock went sheer down, with here and there a fig, an aloe, or a clump of prickly pears growing in the crevices of its sides. Once or twice they knocked at doors, hoping to get some information from the inmates. But their knocks met with no response.

In a stable scooped out of the very rock a donkey brayed, filling the silent village with its hideous voice.

Wilson passed on, deciding he would now start a systematic hunt, and knock at every door until he found someone at home.

He was about to put this scheme into force when he saw a form slinking up one of the dark alleys—a form he thought he knew.

"Wolf! Wolf!" he called quickly.

One wolf-dog is very like another. But, for all that, Wilson was not mistaken. At his voice the animal stopped, looked round, wagged its tail, and then trotted on again.

He knew his search for Désirée was ended, for her four-footed guardian never strayed far from her.

Telling his interpreter to go back to the car, Wilson followed quickly after the animal.

Presently, by one of the low wooden doors let into the deep walls, the dog paused and scratched and whined. A moment later the door opened, and it was lost to sight.

Wilson was some distance down the narrow street, but near enough to note the door.

He went forward quickly and knocked.

"Entrez," a voice said.

It was a soft, sad little voice that he would have known anywhere, no matter what language it spoke.

He opened the door. A low room met his gaze, entered

by an arched way; a room with a stone floor, whitewashed stone walls, and heavy beams across the ceiling, supporting the rough planks of some crude chamber above. It had one little low window overlooking a precipice, and far below was the azure sea where white-sailed ships cast violet shadows.

By one of the walls stood an old oak chest, with a heavy wooden chair on either side of it. On a wide chimney-piece high above an open fireplace, where an iron cooking-pot hung, were a few specimens of coarse crockery. In the middle of the floor was a small, bare, black table. A wide wooden bench with a cushion or two filled the space by the window.

There Désirée was sitting, the dog already at her feet; and she seemed to be the only person in the tiny house.

The opening door made her turn her head in that direction. A small, tortured face met Wilson's view, with deep, dark rings under the sightless eyes and a black bruise on the white forehead.

Her look of suffering cut him to the quick. He just stood on the doorstep gazing at her, feeling as tortured as she looked.

"What is it? Who is there?" she asked in French, as the moments passed and nothing was said.

Into the darkness at the far end of the room a dull yellow patch had come, and in the patch a dark, vague shadow stood, and that was all the girl could see. She imagined the visitor to be someone with a message or parcel for Marie; some neighbor, since the dog had not given the menacing bark that always portended a stranger.

"Désirée," he said hoarsely.

At his voice a little cry broke from her lips, and her hands went to her face to hide it from his view.

"Oh, no! Oh, no! Go away," she moaned.

Wilson had no intention of going away. Closing the door, at the risk of a scene, he went forward.

"No, my little one, I'm not going to leave you alone in the dark," he said gently.

With his heart full of love and sympathy, he leaned over her to take her hands from her stricken face. She tried to push him away, and when this had no effect she hid her face in the cushions of the bench and burst into tears.

It took more than tears to turn Wilson from his purpose.

Seating himself beside her, he lifted her from her hiding-place. He laid her head on his shoulder, and kept a strong arm around her.

"If any crying has to be done," he said firmly, "it's going to be done here."

For a moment she struggled against his decree. Then, finding there was no escape, she hid her face against his rough tweed coat, and the sobs went on.

Wilson had had no idea a girl could cry so much. And each one of the great sobs seemed as if it would tear her to pieces.

He patted her back and smoothed her hair, and when her handkerchief was wet through he gave her his own.

He did not kiss her or speak of love. The sort of love he wanted to talk about she was in no condition to listen to. It was a mother she needed, and he tried to fill the rôle as well as he was able.

In some degree he must have succeeded. Presently the sobs died down to long, convulsive gasps and shivers.

Then, with a careful finger, Wilson touched the wet cheek that was nearest to him.

"Well, have you finished for the time being?" he asked.

"I am disgraced," a choked voice said, still full of tears.

"Nothing of the sort. Nobody knows but me. And I'm not going to say a word."

"I—I've been so proud of my name. And now——!"

"Nobody in their senses would ever blame you."

After this there was a long silence. On a broad, hard shoulder Désirée sniffed and choked, and with a large handkerchief mopped a small face Wilson had not been allowed to see since the tears started.

He had come back into her life again, this one friend of her own choosing, with his kind, quiet ways and big, careful hands, this time bringing with him comfort as well as a feeling of perfect security. The world never seemed quite so dark when he was there.

"I deceived you," she whispered presently, in a shamed voice.

"How did you manage that?"

"I—I never told you I couldn't see. I was so ashamed. I—I always feel such a pariah."

"Never mind, I know now," he said gently.

With a caressing gesture his hand rested on her head. He was wishing she had told him at the first. Then it would have saved him a ghastly blunder, and both of them the last few days of mental torture.

Again there was silence between them.

Désirée did not resist being held, too utterly worn out to move, hardly aware of anything, in fact, except that strength and comfort and sympathy had come into her life again.

"You won't make me go back and have to be with—them?" she asked presently.

At the appeal Wilson's arm tightened round her. She was so utterly helpless, so absolutely at the mercy of anyone who came into her dark life.

"Make you?" he said passionately. "My God, no! I'm going to take charge of you now," he went on more steadily. "You can come back with me to my hotel. And to-morrow, or the next day, or when I think you're equal to it, we'll come to some arrangement about the future."

At the promise Désirée looked up, and a pathetic little face came into view, swollen and tearstained, but without its tortured look.

"You're feeling better now, aren't you?" he asked.

She nodded, and her head remained on the resting place he had provided.

At close quarters he studied her eyes. He had not had much opportunity hitherto. Generally when she had been with him they were downcast—as much from shame as shyness, he now realized. There was a blurred look about them, a sort of mistiness, but for all their blindness they were beautiful.

However, it was not her eyes he next commented on.

"And you're not going to cry any more," he continued firmly. "I don't allow crying when I'm about. I look upon it as a personal insult. And you wouldn't like to hurt my feelings, would you?"

Désirée said nothing. Her mouth quivered, and she started rubbing a finger up and down the cloth of his coat.

When that finger started rubbing him, it required firmness on the part of Wilson to remember his motherly rôle. But he knew he might lose more than he could gain by rushing the situation. The girl was even more of a

child than he had deemed, left as she had been to wander alone in her dark world; more like twelve years old than twenty-one; by no means ripe for the sort of love he wanted.

Presently she drew away from him, with an air of having suddenly realized that it was not right to be where she was.

However, Wilson did not give her time to dwell on the subject.

"We'd better be getting your things together," he said. "The motor is waiting somewhere just outside the village, so we can start back at once. And I'll leave my interpreter to explain matters to Juliette's daughter," he finished, getting to his feet.

"I think my things are in there," she said, pointing to a low wooden door let into the thick wall, as she got up.

"You stay where you are," he said. "I'll do the packing."

He was fearful lest she might hit or hurt herself, moving about in rooms that were not familiar.

With an obedience that he now knew was due to utter helplessness she sat down.

Wilson made his way into the bedroom, a low, dark little place with a stone floor and one wall of the same material. In it was a truckle bed, a chair, and a minute washstand. There was a little trunk standing in one corner, containing most of the things Désirée had taken with her on her flight. Into it Wilson placed the blue muslin dress that was lying on the bed, and one or two other articles in the cupboard-like room that could belong to no one but Désirée. On a large iron nail run into a crevice of the stone hung the thin white cloak and the little hat with the cherries.

With these in one hand, and carrying the trunk in the other, he passed out of the chamber.

He wrapped the cloak about Désirée and put the hat on her head, with the cherries dangling about her ears, as he had seen them on their first meeting.

"Is it on straight?" she questioned anxiously.

It was, so far as Wilson could see, and the query filled him anew with pity. His fairy princess was far worse off than his mother's fairy tale had depicted. She could not even see if her hat were on straight!

Then he drew her arm through his, and took her out of the poor little house, the dog at their heels.

As he drove back to Nice, it seemed to Wilson he had won all round, for he had both Désirée and the necklace.

CHAPTER XXVI

A GOOD SAMARITAN

On reaching his hotel Wilson found it was not the easiest thing in the world to get a young, unchaperoned girl installed there as his guest. It was all very well for him to say he was Désirée's guardian, but it would be difficult to get other people to see him in that light.

Leaving his charge in the big lounge hall, he went to the bureau to engage a room for her.

At his request the clerk muttered something, and immediately telephoned for the manager.

When the latter appeared Wilson repeated his request.

"I'm sorry, but there isn't a room vacant," was the smooth reply.

"Never mind, the Countess de Mailly can have my room," Wilson said. "And you can give me a shakedown in the billiard room or the lounge. Anywhere. I don't mind so long as she's comfortable."

However, the manager remained obdurate. There was neither billiard room nor lounge, nor even a bathroom available.

"But some one moved out of a room on my corridor only this morning," Wilson insisted.

This remark of his made matters even worse.

"It isn't done in this hotel, Mr. Wilson," the manager explained. "Not openly, at least. You could have brought the lady with you when you first came, as your wife or

sister, and then it would have been no concern of mine. As it is——!"

The manager shrugged his shoulders.

It was a moment or so before Wilson grasped the situation. He seldom swore, but when it dawned on him what the manager meant he indulged in a regular orgy of bad language.

"You damned fool," he finished. "This is a straight deal. The child hasn't a friend in the world except myself."

The manager said nothing, but he looked down his nose. He had heard similar tales.

"What is it, Mr. Wilson? What's the trouble?" an inquisitive voice startled him by asking.

The voice made him turn quickly; it belonged to the only married woman that he knew in the place.

"It's a girl, Mrs. Green," he said, smiling.

She wagged a finger at him.

"That's an unusual trouble for *you*, Mr. Wilson."

"She's stranded here without friends or money, owing to the strike. I brought her along with me. And now they haven't the decency—or pretend they've too much decency—to let me have a room for her," he explained.

Mrs. Green knew her man if the manager did not. She wondered what sort of a girl had aroused John Wilson's interest to such an extent that he was prepared to lose his steady-going reputation on her account.

"Who is she? What's her name?" she asked, all curiosity.

Wilson gave the facts about Désirée that would most appeal to Mrs. Green.

"De Mailly is her name. She's French. The Countess

de Mailly. She's only a kid. Just twenty-one. And she's blind."

"Blind! Poor child. And a countess!"

Mrs. Green turned quickly towards the manager.

"Make a bed up in my dressing room for the Countess. I'll look after her."

Wilson could have hugged his friend. This arrangement appeared to satisfy the manager. It dawned on him Wilson was not the Don Juan he had imagined.

"Where is she?" Mrs. Green asked.

"She's in the hall. But she's very nervous with strangers," Wilson said diplomatically. "I'll go and tell her about you first."

He turned into the lounge hall where Désirée was sitting, the dog's head on her knee, a frightened expression on her face.

At Wilson's approach a little smiled chased away her scared look.

"The hotel is full," he explained. "But an English lady, a friend of mine, insists on you sleeping in her dressing room. She's a good sort. I'm sure you'll like her. I said you were stranded here because of the strike. I couldn't say anything about—them."

He paused for a moment, taking one of her hands into his.

"She's the woman they took the bracelet from," he went on gently. "I'm sorry. But you mustn't worry about that. She has no idea who took it. But she'll be sure to speak about having lost it, so I thought it was wiser to tell you."

At his words Désirée's hand started to tremble.

"Can't I stay with you? I—I shall feel so uncomfortable and ashamed being with her."

"By and by you'll be with me always, I hope," he said earnestly. "But this is the best I can manage at present."

Then Mrs. Green, unable to restrain herself any longer, bore down on them.

She did not wait to be presented to Désirée.

"The poor child is utterly worn out," she cried. "She must go to bed at once. You won't see anything more of her to-night, Mr. Wilson. No wonder you swore at the manager."

"Did I swear at him? I was feeling fairly ratty. I knew the Countess was at the end of her tether."

Then he drew the girl to her feet.

"Good-night, Désirée. I'll see you again at breakfast. In the meantime Mrs. Green will look after you."

"You bet I will," Mrs. Green agreed heartily.

She put her arm around Désirée's waist.

"Come along, my dear."

Wilson watched them go, glad he had circumnavigated an unprepared-for corner so successfully.

Then he turned his attention to the dog.

"You, old chap, will have to sleep in the garage. But there'll be no difficulty in getting accommodation for you. You're not a helpless girl with all the world against you."

Having relieved his feelings a little by this remark, with the dog at his heels Wilson made in the direction of the garage.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE GILBERTS MEET WITH AN OBSTACLE

At the end of a five days' search the Gilberts were no nearer finding their hostage, and the fact began to weigh on them heavily. What was more, Bassino had turned nasty, refusing point blank to lend them any money, and employing private detectives of his own to hunt for Désirée.

Funds were painfully low. That evening the father and son dined in their bedroom, meagerly, off a few dry slices of ham and rolls. During the course of the frugal meal Eugene had been unusually silent.

"Since we can't find Désirée," he remarked presently, "we shall have to try another little game of bluff."

"What have you got in your head now?" the older man growled.

The Count loved his meals, and to have to dine off ham and rolls did not improve his temper.

"What's to prevent us from going to Wilson and saying we have her? I can't sell that bracelet here in Nice. I can't get any more petrol on tick. To-morrow I shall have to sell the motor to keep us going. If we don't get hold of the necklace within the next few days we shall have to give it up as a bad job and go back to Paris and realize on our last deal. We're in a bad way, *mon père*—bankrupt, our source of income swept away. You were a fool to keep Bassino dangling on for the sake of the neck-

lace. You ought to have let him have Désirée there and then. We could have milked him when the funds were low. As it is, he won't let us have a cent."

Eugene helped himself carefully to mustard, which he spread over the dry ham.

"The only luxury left to us," he went on. "And when this pot is finished, goodness knows where the next is coming from. It may even have to be worked for," he concluded with a shudder.

"Curse you and your ill-timed jokes," his father said.

"Not me, *mon cher*," Eugene replied, unruffled, "not your dutiful son, who is only trying to rectify the mistakes brought about by avaricious age. Curse Wilson, whose honesty has reduced us to this plight."

"Why must that damned Englishman interfere in things that don't concern him?"

"I believe that is what is called a 'national characteristic,'" Eugene replied.

"Come to the point, can't you?" the old Count broke in irritably.

"The point—that which has position, but no magnitude, like ourselves—is that to-night, after dinner, we'll go to our friend Wilson. We'll say that we have found Désirée, and that if he refuses to give up the necklace we'll take her where he'll never see her any more. He won't like that. He'll spend the night, perhaps, in making up his mind. Yes, we'll allow him that much rope. At night a man thinks deeply about the girl he wants to marry. And by the morning he'll have decided in favor of Désirée. Then we'll have the necklace and leave him, or Bassino, to find the girl."

"I can't carry it through," his father said peevishly.

"I'm afraid of Wilson. A quiet man is always dangerous."

"All right. Leave it to me then. I'm afraid of nothing—except work."

Both the Gilberts appeared in Wilson's hotel after dinner—suave, polished, and well dressed, as if there had been no scrambled-through meal of dry ham and rolls immediately behind them, no poverty ahead.

Wilson was sitting in his usual corner in the hall, deep in some newspaper.

Eugene's voice roused him to the fact of their presence.

"Well, Mr. Wilson, you may have the necklace, but we have Désirée."

The remark took Wilson by surprise—a surprise which Eugene misinterpreted.

"And if you don't let us have the necklace," he went on in a threatening manner, "we're going to marry her to a South American millionaire, a man as mad for her as you are."

Wilson had recovered from his astonishment.

"Oh, yes," he said slowly.

He could afford to be casual about the matter. Désirée was upstairs, comfortably tucked up in a bed in Mrs. Green's dressing room. Immediately after dinner the latter had bustled out to see how her charge was faring. Had Désirée been kidnaped he would have heard of it long before now.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" the Count de Gilbert asked.

"Nothing," Wilson said, returning to his newspaper.

His attitude told the confederates there was some hitch in their plan.

"There's my Arthur; he's twenty-four, a fine, good-looking boy, and so steady; his father's right hand in the business. You'd like him, Countess, and he'd like you, because he likes fair girls."

Mrs. Green paused and did a rapid piece of match-making; then, just as rapidly, she undid it again. She remembered another who "liked" Désirée—the man who had brought her to the hotel the previous evening. She sighed deeply, seeing a desirable daughter-in-law vanish —a girl who was a countess, and as helpless as a little child, whom she could have fussed over and petted for the rest of her life.

"Now, my dear, you run along down to breakfast," she said. "Mr. Wilson always has his downstairs, and he said I wasn't to keep you up here for both dinner and breakfast. As for me, I'm not fit to appear before lunch. I'm too busy getting the 'footprints off the sands of time.'"

Then she remembered Désirée could not find her way alone. After kissing the girl fondly, she rang for a chambermaid to take her down.

CHAPTER XXIX

DÉSIRÉE'S BLINDNESS

Although Wilson had ordered breakfast for half-past eight, he was in the dining room just after the clock struck eight. The moment Désirée appeared he crossed to her side. Relieving the chambermaid of her charge, he took the girl to his own table.

Now he knew her for what she really was, untaught and afflicted, wholly ignorant of the world and all that went on in it, and although he loved her none the less, he put his own love in the background and treated her as a big brother would a little sister of whom he was fond.

"Well, Désirée," he said, once they were seated, "French people are going to have two eggs for breakfast this morning, as well as a lot of other things."

"You must think I live to eat," she answered, smiling at him shyly.

"You're going to live to do a lot of things you've never done before," he replied emphatically.

"What sort of things?" she asked, with timid curiosity.

"Well, after lunch, for instance, you're going with Mrs. Green to buy new hats and dresses, as many as you like, and whatever you fancy. And to-night I'm going to take you out to dinner and a dance."

A little flush of excitement came to her face, then it died away and she was silent again.

As they awaited the coming of breakfast, Désirée's

mind was running on the comfort and luxury that had suddenly come into her life, and the things her friend said she must buy and do.

"They'll cost a lot of money, *mon ami,*" she ventured presently. "I don't know how I shall be able to pay you back."

"Don't you worry about that," he said cheerfully. "If the worst comes to the worst, you can sell your necklace instead of having it buried with you."

At the mention of the necklace an anxious expression crossed her face.

Wilson thought it was because he had suggested she should sell her heirloom. However, he was wrong.

At that moment, foremost in Désirée's mind was the curse on it—the evil that always came on whatever or whoever the owner liked the best. She knew what was her most cherished possession—the friend sitting opposite to her. And she would rather have died than have any evil come on him.

"Perhaps I'd better sell it," she said. "Is it worth enough to buy Mrs. Green another bracelet with, as well as pay for all the things I'm having now?"

Her words told Wilson what he had always suspected —that she had no idea of the fortune her heirloom represented.

"Has Mrs. Green been harping on her loss?" he asked sharply, a note of concern in his voice, for he realized to the fullest how Désirée would feel on the subject.

"Oh, no. She never said anything at all about it. She talked of quite different things. But I can't bear to think of anything being taken from her."

With Désirée now in his keeping, Wilson had no intention of selling the necklace. Married to him, she could

keep her heirloom. As for it being cursed, he never gave a thought to that.

"I'll take it to a jeweler's this afternoon and see how much it's really worth," he remarked.

"Yes, do please. I'd like to buy Mrs. Green a bracelet like the one they—she—that's lost," she finished in a shamefaced way.

The arrival of breakfast turned their attention to other matters.

After pouring out the coffee, Wilson took the tops off Désirée's eggs for her, buttered her roll, and put all she wanted within reach of her fingers. During the repast, he marveled continually how she managed as well as she did. Considering their few meetings, he quite saw how she had deceived him. She went about her meal with no more blunders than a shortsighted, imaginative girl might make who wandered in a world of dreams, occasionally coming down to earth and the mere facts around her. But Wilson knew her whole energies were concentrated on keeping her affliction from obtruding on the outside world.

"Can't you see at all, Désirée?" he asked presently.

In watching her slow, gentle movements it seemed incredible that she was sightless.

"I know when it's night and when it's day. In the daytime people are just vague shadows that move in a thick mist."

The pathetic confession told Wilson that whatever was wrong with her eyes, at least the optic nerve was not wholly atrophied.

Then he remembered having read somewhere that people who are really blind—blind with the blindness of

dead eyes—cannot cry. Yet how Désirée had wept! The shoulder of his coat seemed still damp with her tears.

With this fallacy well to the fore in his mind he asked:

"Have you ever had your eyes examined?"

"Not that I can remember. My uncle always said it would be no use."

Then slowly, in shame, the tears started to trickle down her cheeks.

"Now, what did I say about crying? It hurts my feelings."

His voice was a caress. After a few sniffs the tears stopped. In Désirée's darkness now was the voice of her friend, kind and comforting. She wanted to go and lean against the strength that had invaded the gloom surrounding her, never to have to move away from it. He felt so like part of herself, this man with his kind, quiet ways, that for all their quietness had such a feeling of power behind them.

For some minutes Wilson was silent.

He attended to his charge's wants, putting butter and marmalade on her toast, and then cutting it up into neat little strips that were easy to handle. He saw she was almost afraid to eat, lest she should spill or drop things on herself. Her inborn daintiness must have made her affliction doubly hard.

As he did these little things for her, he was thinking of what she had said.

So far as she knew, her eyes had never been examined. Her uncle, the one who should have attended to the matter, had not troubled about it. Considering what Wilson now knew of the Gilberts, he put a question to himself: "Why hadn't her guardian given her a chance of seeing?"

His shrewd mind did not have to search far for a reason.

Désirée blind would be much more easily robbed of her heritage than a Désirée who could see.

As matters stood, she could neither read nor write, and in worldly matters she was as ignorant as a child of ten, as easily gulled.

As he pondered on the matter, the feeling grew within him more and more that the Count de Gilbert had purposely kept his niece in darkness and ignorance.

Her father had died before she was born, her mother when she was a week old, but whether her grandfather had lived long enough to have had her eyes thoroughly tested and examined Wilson did not know.

"How old were you when your grandfather died?" Wilson asked presently.

"I was just over a month old."

The answer satisfied him.

At a month old it might not be known that the child's eyes were defective.

And an operation in her babyhood might have cured her!

At that moment Wilson could have cheerfully strangled the Count de Gilbert, for he was now almost certain that Désirée had been condemned to years of blindness by her scheming thief of a guardian. And the one question that filled his mind was, Had he come into her life too late to do any good?

CHAPTER XXX

THE PRINCESS OF THE FAIRY TALE

That morning Wilson took his charge for a drive to a favorite spot of his—a jutting tongue of land where pink and white and yellow villas nestled among orange, lemon, and loquat trees; where palms stood out against a sapphire sky; where the air was fragrant with the scent of peach blossom, and cherry trees covered the ground with a snow of white petals, and the olives stood gray and old against the greenness of the spring.

He drove his car right to the end of the cape. There, scant grass and wild thyme grew, and stunted pines stood, twisted and lichen-grown, leaning back from the sea in which they were sometimes mirrored.

The waves broke gently on shelving cliffs. Here and there little pools glittered like sapphires and emeralds and jewels of jade among the brown rocks. Beyond, an expanse of milky blue water stretched away to a misty horizon. Behind, the mountains of the mainland stood up like a wall, shutting out the workaday world, their tops covered with a blur of white clouds.

Wilson's heart was bleeding when he helped Désirée from the car. She could see nothing of the beauty around her, and he determined that she should have light if it lay within the power of man to give it to her.

Because she could not see, he took her to the sweetest spot he could find, where wild thyme and lavender grew,

and bushes of fragrant roses; where the sun drew out the incense of the pines, and the sea crooned on the rocks below.

He picked a little corner that was nothing but scent and soft, murmurous sounds, where a faint, fresh, salt breeze fanned her hair, making the loose curls dance about her wistful face.

Taking off his coat, he folded it up for her to sit on. Then he stretched himself beside her, watching her as she sat with the cherries dangling about her ears, her tragic eyes fixed on an expanse of blue she could not see.

"It's very nice here," she said presently. "So sweet and fresh and peaceful. I love to hear the sea whispering so softly. I don't like noise. That's why I'm so afraid of thunder. But if it hadn't been for that storm I should never have known you."

"I'm not so sure about that," Wilson responded. "I'd seen you, even if you hadn't seen me. I should have tracked you to your lair, and scraped acquaintance somehow."

"Would you?" she asked. "Why?"

"Because, Désirée, you are so beautiful," he answered, a touch of passion in his voice.

His words made her shiver.

"Mr. Bassino always says things like that," she said in a low voice. "I—I don't like him. And—once he kissed me."

At this Wilson pricked up his ears.

"Who's Mr. Bassino?" he asked sharply.

"The man my uncle says I must marry. I have so wanted to ask you to help me—to tell me what to do about it. I can't bear him near me. When he touches me I feel I must scream. If I were a little girl I know

I should. But my uncle says I must marry him, because he's a millionaire."

She went on to say where she had met the Brazilian, and how he would be coming to claim her any day now that she was twenty-one.

As Wilson listened, it seemed to him that more than ever was she the poor little princess of his mother's fairy tale. There was even the ogre! And more than ever he hated her relatives, who would have thrust on her a man she loathed.

"Don't you worry about the ogre, Princess," he said fondly. "Leave him to me."

"You won't make me marry Mr. Bassino?"

That pleading, pathetic little face, with the small mouth trembling like a pale rosebud in its fragile loveliness, almost made Wilson forget his brotherly rôle in a mad desire to put his lips on it, and make it tremble through love, not fear.

"You're never going to be *made* to do anything now, Désirée. You're going to do just whatever you like for all the rest of your life. If you don't want to marry Mr. Bassino, that settles it. I'll see nobody makes you."

This promise took the strained look from her face.

"You've no idea what a relief it is to me to hear you say that. I'm so afraid of that man. I'd rather die than have to be with him always," she confessed.

"How would you like being with me always?" he asked tenderly.

One of the "rose-leaf" hands that Wilson loved came in his direction, hovered for a moment, missed its aim, hovered again, and then settled on his arm. "I like being with you better than with anybody else," she said. "And

I've never really liked being with anyone before except Juliette and Pierre."

Wilson took the little hand into his and held it there, and Désirée was quite content to let it remain.

"Why did you call me Princess?" she asked presently.

Then he told her the fairy tale his mother used to tell him when he was a small boy, about the princess with the blue eyes and golden hair, with the skin like alabaster and hands no bigger than rose leaves, who lived all alone in a ruined castle. But he left off with the slaying of the dragons and the ogre. He did not add that she married him and they lived happily ever after in the old castle far off in the mountains.

She smiled sadly.

"There's one dragon you can't slay, *mon ami*. He'll be with me always."

Wilson knew she referred to her blindness. He was not so sure that even that dragon could not be slain also, but he said nothing of this to Désirée.

After lunch that day, when she was out shopping with Mrs. Green, he went to the manager and inquired the name of the best eye specialist in the place. Then he telephoned and made an appointment for five o'clock. At four he had arranged to meet Désirée and her chaperone at a fashionable restaurant for tea.

Having nothing else to do, in the interval he went to a large jeweler's shop. First of all he looked at rings—rings so small that they refused to do more than go over the top of his little finger. Finally he chose one mounted with a big pearl set round with diamonds.

Having made his purchase, he produced "The Necklace of Tears."

"I wonder if you'd mind giving me a rough idea of what this is worth?" he asked.

On seeing it, a look of awe passed over the jeweler's face, to be chased away a moment later by an incredulous expression.

"Just a moment," he said.

He fetched various little implements and a bottle or two. Then he tapped and tested all the stones, and looked at them through a magnifying glass.

Afterwards, with a deep sigh, he straightened himself, and stood looking at the necklace as if at some god.

"When you brought it out I couldn't believe my eyes," he said at length. "The stones are real, every one of them. Diamonds have practically trebled in value during the last few years. You'd get £200,000 for that if you took it to the right market—America, of course. If you want to sell it, I can find you a customer at a five per cent. commission," he finished, handing it back reluctantly.

Wilson scooped up the necklace and put it into its bag.

"It's not for sale," he said. "I'm only getting it valued for a friend."

He left the shop, thinking that Désirée was as well off as he was, for her necklace represented a fortune equaling his own.

CHAPTER XXXI

A CONSULTATION

Promptly at five o'clock Wilson's motor drew up outside the doctor's house. During tea he had told Désirée where he was taking her, and Mrs. Green had volunteered to accompany them.

When they were ushered into the waiting room Désirée sat beside him, saying nothing, her hands clasped tightly together on her knee, a strained expression on her face.

Hardly knowing what he was saying, Wilson talked in a light vein to Mrs. Green.

They did not have to wait very long before being ushered into the consulting room. Leaving Mrs. Green behind, Wilson went in with the patient.

As Désirée entered, the doctor glanced at her sharply. She looked in a nervous, overwrought condition; more as if she were on trial for her life than coming in for a consultation. Very soon he had her installed in a chair, and the examination started.

In a fever of anxiety Wilson sat waiting. If the verdict were unfavorable, he would not let it rest at that. He would take her to Paris, London, America—to every specialist the world over—before he gave up the task as hopeless.

All this he arranged with himself as he listened to the doctor's questions and Désireé's replies in a low, trembling

voice that spoke of the mental strain she was enduring, and saw those beautiful blurred eyes being looked into by sharp, clever ones, in a variety of lights and through a variety of instruments.

On making the appointment Wilson had asked that Désirée should not be in the room when the verdict was given. Whether it was good or bad, he wanted to break the news himself, for in the first case the relief would be almost a shock; in the second, he wanted to ease the blow as much as possible.

A quarter of an hour had barely elapsed when the specialist put down his instruments.

"I think I've seen all I need," he remarked.

As he spoke he glanced at Wilson, censure in his gaze.

At once Wilson was on his feet, anxious to get Désirée out of the way for a moment and to hear what the specialist had to say.

"I'll take the Countess de Mailly back to her friend," he said, hurrying with her towards the door.

Leaving Désirée with Mrs. Green, he made his way with all haste back to the consulting room.

"Well?" he asked, the moment the door was closed.

Wilson felt his voice was more a croak than a question, for his throat had gone suddenly hard and dry.

"There's no reason why your young friend shouldn't see as well as you or I can," the doctor replied.

Wilson did not wait to hear any more. At once he was back in the waiting room.

His footstep made Désirée start up, her face white and drawn.

"It's all right," he said quickly.

"All right?" she repeated faintly.

"There's a very good chance of a cure. Every chance, in fact."

"Every chance?" she repeated, in a dazed voice. "Then my uncle—— Oh, *mon Dieu!*"

Her hands went to her face, as if to shut out some hideous truth. Then she started to sway slightly.

"She's going to faint," Mrs. Green said quickly, scrambling to her feet with more haste than elegance.

Quick as she was, Wilson was quicker. Light and limp, Désirée fell into his arms.

"Poor little girl! She's had a rough time. And now she knows what I suspected," he said, as he laid her on the couch.

"What's that?" Mrs. Green asked.

"That she could have been cured years ago had anyone troubled to attend to the matter."

Mrs. Green threw up her hands with horror.

Without waiting to explain things further, Wilson went back to the consulting room.

His abrupt entry made the doctor look round.

"The Countess has fainted," Wilson said, his voice heavy with anxiety.

However, the specialist took the announcement very casually.

"I'm not surprised. It was evident the Countess de Mailly felt her infirmity deeply, and the relief has been too much for her. Why wasn't the operation done years ago?" he went on in a severe tone. "Through gross neglect she has been condemned to pass the whole of her young life in darkness."

The words roused Wilson to the fact that for the sake of her own good name Désirée's relatives must be screened.

"The Countess has only been in my charge twenty-four hours, or you may be sure it would have been done sooner."

The doctor's gaze rested on him with interest this time, not censure.

He was wondering how this girl of his own nation, one of the old *noblesse,* had come into the keeping of the obviously self-made Englishman. But she had come with a chaperone and from an hotel whose clientèle were beyond reproach. There were a lot of questions he wanted to ask, but he had a very good idea of the type of man with whom he was dealing, and he deemed it better to keep strictly to professional matters.

"When would you like me to operate?" he asked.

"To-morrow, if possible. I won't have the child kept in darkness one day longer than is necessary."

"To-morrow then," the doctor agreed.

"And let her have the best of everything," Wilson said. "Don't stint for anything. She's got a lot to make up for in the way of comfort."

"I'll see she lacks nothing," the doctor replied, still wondering how his new patient came to be under Wilson's protection.

Then he had more to say about Désirée's case, but it was of a technical nature. Most of it was beyond Wilson's comprehension, but he gathered that the operation could have been done when Désirée was a baby.

Seeing Wilson was fidgeting with anxiety, the doctor picked up a bottle of eau-de-cologne and went into the waiting room.

Désirée woke to the world feeling like a condemned prisoner reprieved. In the darkness was the voice of the friend who was trying to save her; the subtle odor

of heather and smoke that always clung about his garments; the feeling of strength and power he had brought into her helpless life.

She stretched her hands towards him.

"To be able to see!" she whispered. "To be just like everyone else! I can't believe it. Oh, my savior! My king!"

Wilson did not know what she said, for she spoke in French. But the doctor did, and Mrs. Green had a good idea, and they both went quickly into the consulting room on the pretext of arranging further details about the coming operation.

Once they had gone, Wilson knelt by Désirée's couch, stroking her hair, patting her hands, for he saw she was distraught with relief and the knowledge of her uncle's treachery.

"It must be a god who has come into my night," that soft, faint voice went on in its own language. "Only gods can bring light into darkness."

But when she took his hands and would have pressed her lips on them, Wilson had a word to say too.

"No, Désirée. No, my little one, I'm not going to have *your* precious kisses on my great paws. This is the place for them." He stooped until his lips rested on hers. Then *he* did the kissing.

The pressure of his lips, tender and passionate, sent a long tremor through the girl. The kiss startled her with its message of longing and desire, but she did not shrink from it, as she did from those her cousin forced on her, and the one Bassino had once stolen. Although it frightened her, and left her weak and trembling, it also left her with a desire to press closer to the giver, to know all that the caress held.

CHAPTER XXXII

WILSON MEETS BASSINO

When Désirée had recovered sufficiently to leave the house, Wilson accompanied her back to the hotel. Afterwards he went out again on a little mission of his own.

Considering the happenings of the last twenty-four hours, he was in a mood for celebrating. He drew up in front of a little shop which made up for lack of window space and the few things displayed therein by its enormous charges, and the fact that in the expanse of rooms behind were garments fit for the wives and daughters of princes and millionaires—garments the eyes of mere shop-gazers were never allowed to rest upon.

Wilson knew what he wanted. Whoever heard of a fairy princess who had not a cloak of ermine? His poor little princess had only a cheap wrap, a mixture of wool and cotton, altogether out of keeping with her position.

He was in a reckless mood, begotten of the taste of Désirée's lips, and the thought of the sight that was so soon to be hers. He intended to have what he wanted, no matter what it cost.

Before long the coveted garment was spread before him—a cloak of white fur, glossy as silk, soft as velvet, all lined with the richest of white silk, with a fringe of black-tipped tails, and a hood that would draw up in a most fascinating manner about a small face.

When the cloak was packed up and put into his motor,

he went to a florist's shop and bought roses—a great bouquet of pale pink ones, like Désirée's wistful mouth; a mouth that he determined should be neither pale nor wistful once the final dragon was slain, but smiling and happy and coral red, as a young girl's should be. A bouquet, too, that matched a new evening frock Mrs. Green had started to talk about during tea, before he had mentioned the appointment with the specialist and hope had taken thought of all else from Désirée.

With his two purchases he returned to the hotel.

That night as he got into his evening clothes he scanned himself critically, wishing he looked more like the men in Désirée's own set, and less like a prize-fighter. Afterwards he went down to the hall and awaited the girl's coming.

Presently one of the chambermaids brought her in. There were mostly men in the hall just then, awaiting their womenfolk. Wilson knew that none of their wives and daughters and sisters could be compared with Désirée. And the men seemed to know it, too, for they all stared at her with open or covert admiration, according to their nationality.

In buying a frock for a young girl Mrs. Green could be trusted; all her own tastes were youthful, and at a good French shop, however *outré* the style might be, it would not be common or vulgar.

Désirée was wearing a quaint, sack-like garment of pale pink silk, stiff with quality, with a low, round neck, and little straight sleeves about three inches long—a frock that did not come much below her knees. There was a fluff of white swansdown about the neck and sleeves and hem. Loose and low about her waist was a golden girdle, and she wore gold shoes and stockings to match. So

attired, she looked like a child of fourteen who, "for fun," had put her hair up.

The moment she appeared Wilson went forward, the bouquet in one hand, the ermine cloak over his arm. He did not feel awkward, ladened with flowers and costly furs; he never felt awkward when doing anything for Désirée. It seemed the most natural thing in the world, this which he had spent his life in waiting for. Nor did the array of eyes turned on him and the girl unnerve him in any way.

He put the bouquet into her hands, the cloak about her shoulders, and she smiled at him, a shy, worshiping smile such as one might give to a kindly and condescending god.

"How nice these smell," she said, burying her face in the roses. "And how nice this feels," she went on, fingering the cloak. "What is it?"

"Ermine," he answered, watching her fondly.

His fairy princess had no idea how beautiful she was, or of the richness of her garments, or that all the eyes in the room were fixed on her.

Then he did something that made the assembly stare still more.

Out from some inner pocket he drew "The Necklace of Tears," and with his big hands clasped it about her slender throat.

He took a step back and looked at her, everything and everybody forgotten except Désirée with her high-bred, fragile beauty, attired in the richest of silk and ermine and diamonds, crowned with her own golden hair.

She stood before him, the fairy princess of his boyhood days, whom he had carried round in his heart and loved and worshiped, who had comforted him and been kind

to him when the other boys had made sport of his patched clothes and his poverty. The last dragon was all but slain, and when it was really dead they would marry and live happily ever after in the old castle far off in the mountains. She would marry him, John Wilson, who had come from nothing, and had once carried stones about in his pocket to keep the wolf from the door. She would be his, this lovely girl, Désirée, Countess de Mailly.

Then he drew one "rose-leaf" hand through his arm.

"Come along, Princess," he said gayly.

It was a beautiful evening, and the distance between their hotel and the one where the *dîner dansant* was taking place was so short that by mutual consent no carriage was taken.

On a gently rippling sea the dusk was settling, turning the blue water into pewter, a heaving expanse that stretched away to the pearly gray of the distant horizon. The remains of a sunset lingered on the westward hills—soft, blurred smears of gold and red and mauve and orange, that were reflected faintly on the heaving water. In a jagged semicircle the great hills stood around the wide sweep of the whispering bay, and close at hand palms shivered and sighed faintly, and little waves broke and whispered on gray pebbles.

As Wilson looked at this earthly paradise he knew that he had always loved beauty, and that, until now, very little of it had come into his life. Generally speaking, money-making is not a pretty occupation, unless connected with the arts, but since the world must go round, somebody must do the unlovely things.

At that moment he was glad there were plenty of people who were blind; not blind as Désirée was, but blind to the sordidness of their lives and occupations. He had

never been really blind to the sordidness of his own. As a small boy he had resented it numbly; as a youth he had realized that it had to be endured; as a man he had tried to glaze over its ugliness with a sheen of gold. But now it was all behind him, the poverty and the ugliness. He had worked hard and kept straight, and the fairy princess had been his talisman against temptation—an ideal that, unlike most ideals, had eventually taken form. Now he was going to have his reward—this peaceful, fruitful, beautiful land that must have been the Garden of Eden and—Désirée. The girl Eve fresh from her Maker could not have been more lovely, more innocent, more desirable, than the child he hoped to marry.

Thus Wilson's thoughts ran as he walked to the neighboring hotel with Désirée on his arm. In spite of the blissful realms in which he moved, he was all attention for his companion, seeing that the little feet in their golden shoes did not halt or stumble.

If people had stared at them in their own hotel, they stared still more in the one Wilson entered.

During dinner, infatuated as he was, and accustomed by now to the stares that always followed his companion, Wilson could not help noticing that a man seated at the far end of the big room stared more blatantly than any of the others. He not only stared, but once or twice he got up and looked at Désirée as if he could not credit what he saw.

No wonder Bassino looked at the Countess de Mailly and could not believe his eyes.

When he knew her she was in shabby, cheap garments, in the back sitting-room of a third-rate New York lodging house; a trembling, shrinking girl who, in spite of her poverty, refused to take the costly presents he would

have poured on her; a wistful, furtive shadow of a girl, who had tried to escape from the room every time he came, who had fainted when he kissed her.

Now she was attired like a princess, the best-dressed woman in the room with a diamond necklace worth a fortune round her neck, and on the chair beside her an ermine cloak fit for a queen. And she was more beautiful than ever, for happiness had given life and color to her face.

As Bassino watched the couple with the sharp eyes of jealousy, he knew it must be Désirée. There could not be two girls so alike and yet similarly afflicted. And he saw the man unobtrusively help and assist her in a variety of little ways that he would not have done had she been quite normal.

Noticing the gross, sensual-looking man's continual scrutiny, Wilson moved himself slightly, so that his broad figure came between Désirée and those covetous, bloodshot eyes. Although she could not see the swarthy foreigner, instinctively Wilson knew she would resent the admiration of such a man. Then, intent on seeing to her needs, he forgot all about the episode.

When dessert was over, and the coming of coffee and liqueurs brought some of the diners to their feet, Bassino bore down in the direction of his fiancée.

As Wilson sat trying to instruct Désirée in the art of cigarette smoking, all at once a thick voice said with savage jealousy and a strong American accent:

"What are you doing here alone with this man, Désirée?"

The voice brought a little cry of fear to her lips, and the cigarette fell from her fingers.

Wilson looked round quickly.

Standing just beside him was the swarthy, bloated man he had noticed earlier in the evening. Unexpected as the situation was, he grasped it.

He was face to face with the ogre. This was the man her uncle would force on her—this gross, dissipated brute. He became almost sick at the thought of those coarse, sensual lips having rested on Désirée's.

"Anything you have to say, Mr. Bassino, kindly say it to me," he put in quickly.

"You! What the hell have you to do with it?" Bassino asked savagely.

"I'm looking after the Countess de Mailly at present," Wilson answered quietly.

"Looking after the Countess de Mailly! It's my business to look after her, not yours. *Sacré!* Don't you know the Countess is my fiancée?"

"I heard her uncle was trying to force her to marry you."

"Force! Nonsense! A French girl has got to marry the man her guardian chooses for her," Bassino replied, with an air of holding himself in.

"In England we go by what the girl says," Wilson answered.

He paused, eyeing the child's frightened face tenderly.

"What do you say, Désirée? Do you want to marry Mr. Bassino?"

"No, no!" she whispered, terror in her voice.

"There you are," Wilson said, "you've had your answer."

Bassino's swarthy face turned purple. He saw the innocence and beauty he coveted slipping from him.

"Désirée! You call her Désirée? My affianced wife! I refuse to let her go. She must come with me at once."

His voice, suddenly raised, brought the attention of the people at the adjacent tables in their direction.

"Be quiet, can't you?" Wilson said with cold impatience. "You've heard what the Countess has to say. Go away, and don't make a row."

To be dismissed in this casual manner infuriated Bassino still further.

"Do you know who I am? I'm a millionaire," he shouted, as if that fact made him all-powerful.

When he liked, Wilson could be quietly offensive. Just now he not only liked, but wanted to be; he loathed the coarse brute who had dared to aspire to Désirée.

"Well, I daresay it's not so much your fault as the fault of an easily gulled and misguided public," he said.

It was a moment or two before Bassino grasped all that lay within Wilson's reply. When he did, he positively danced with rage.

"You darned thief!" he raved. "You dare insult me as well as steal my girl."

He made as if to drag Désirée away there and then, but with a quick upward jerk of his arms Wilson knocked aside his hands.

"Be quiet," he said again, for by now the Brazilian's noise had attracted the attention of the whole room. "Whatever you have to say, come round and say it at my hotel to-morrow, not here, in a public room, before this lady."

To-morrow Désirée would be in a nursing home, and Bassino could rave as much as he liked and she would not be there to hear him.

"I shall have the girl," Bassino shouted, beside himself with rage and passion. "I tell you she's mine. I paid her guardian fifty thousand dollars for her."

Then Wilson got to his feet, suddenly savage at the commotion Bassino was making, and the undesired attention he was drawing to Désirée.

With clenched fist he turned on the Brazilian.

"If you don't shut up, I'll shove your yellow teeth down your throat," he said. "Shouting your back-stair slave-dealings for all the room to hear!"

"Hear! Hear!" several voices said, *sotto voce,* in English.

"The Countess is going to marry whom she likes," Wilson went on, "not any wealthy scum her uncle thinks well to shove on her. I'm her guardian now. Do you understand?"

Before that clenched fist Bassino retreated, spluttering and raging. "I shall go to her uncle. I refuse to give her up," he screamed from a safe distance.

Wilson turned to Désirée, who sat white-faced and trembling behind him.

He had a feeling that the Brazilian would follow them round all the evening, cursing and raging, half-mad at the thought of the girl he saw slipping from him.

"Désirée, I think we'd better go," he said.

At once she was on her feet.

Picking up her cloak and flowers, Wilson drew her hand on to his arm, and started down the room, Bassino following. But he did not follow far. The men who had quietly applauded Wilson's action got up from their tables and unobtrusively impeded the Brazilian's way. Wilson and his charge were out of the door before Bassino was half-way down the room, and when the latter reached the door a little group of men had gathered there, who ignored him when he asked to pass.

Once safely out of the hotel, Désirée relaxed her clutch on Wilson's arm.

"I'm so glad to get away from that man," she said with relief. "I'm so afraid of him. However can I thank you?"

"You can thank me best by not worrying any more about him," Wilson replied.

Outside, all was peace and moonlight. The sea was a heaving sheet of silver. The white light from above crowned the palm trees as if with snow. The vague hills and the bay were wrapped in a luminous veil of misty, milky blue. High above, in the deep, dark vault of a star-strewn sky, the moon soared, a mass of burning silver.

"Shall we have a little walk?" he asked.

"I should love to. It's so quiet and cool here by the sea."

For some minutes the walk went on in silence, to the music of molten waves that broke on pebbles which the moon had turned into ingots of silver.

"What are you thinking about, Désirée?" he asked presently.

Two little hands were on Wilson's sleeve instead of one, clasping his arm with a gentle, clinging pressure, and a small, thin face was turned on him, radiant with hope and happiness.

"To-morrow it will be light," she said.

"Perhaps not quite to-morrow, my little girl. They're sure to keep your eyes bandaged up for a week or two."

He paused, regarding her tenderly, wondering what hopes and desires, what conception of things, lived in her dark, untaught world.

"What's the first thing you'd like to see, Princess?" he asked.

"You," she said, without hesitation.

"Why?" he asked gently.

"'God said, let there be light, and there was light,'" she whispered.

The answer left him silent.

For the first time he realized that she had never seen him, a fact he had not paused to consider before. And now the thought sent a cold chill through him.

What would she think of him when she saw him—when he was something more than "a vague shadow in a thick mist"? Those whispered words of hers suggested some heroic figure.

Wilson knew he was not handsome. At that moment the image he conjured up of himself was a libel.

When those beautiful eyes could see, they would see him as he really was—his ugly face, his clumsy figure, his great, chipped hands. The mere sight of him might sweep away all her liking.

What a hopeless blank life would be without those little hands to touch him, without that small face turned on him with trust and affection.

In the moonlight, with strained, hungry eyes, Wilson watched his companion.

Then a great temptation suddenly beset him.

She was so easily deceived, so utterly helpless.

He could find an excuse for not taking her to the specialist the next day. He could pretend he was going to another. It would be easy work to bribe a man into doing a mock operation. Then a few weeks of bandaged eyes and afterwards—still darkness.

As Wilson walked along with Désirée on one side of

him, the devil walked on the other and whispered in his ear, telling him of all he might lose if he did the right thing.

In the white moonlight, to the murmur of the silvered sea, with his eyes fixed on the girl, Wilson fought against temptation, desire, and fear—fear that Désirée might turn from him when she saw him.

If he kept her in darkness he could not stay in Nice for fear his sins should find him out. He would take her to England, to his own town. In the best suburb there he had a pleasant house, with an efficient staff of servants. He would have a winter garden built for her that held all the flowers of her own fragrant, sunny land, and when the days were dull and wet she could wander in it. And he would have a music room fitted up for her, and she should have the best teachers, and every luxury and comfort that he could think of.

Every morning he would set off to business with her kisses on his lips; each lunch time she would come down the front steps to meet him, in her timid hesitant way, brought there by the hoot of his motor in the drive. And again in the evening—his helpless, cherished little wife, who waited for his comings, who had no life outside of him.

He would take her to dances and concerts. She would have a real good time. And people would say:

"There's John Wilson and his beautiful wife, the French countess. She's blind."

But they would not add, "Poor child," for when she was with him there would be happiness on her face. He would see to that, even if he had to commit a dastardly crime in order to keep her.

And there would be blissful evenings when they were

quite alone together, when he read to her, and she played to him. And he would carry her upstairs in his arms, and each night hold her pressed close against his heart, and each day work hard so that she could have everything she wanted—everything except the one great gift of sight, and that he would deliberately hold back from her, lest in giving it her love should be swept away from him. The act of a coward and a scoundrel!

If he kept her in darkness he would be as big a fiend as her uncle—worse even—the vilest of brutes, caring for nothing so long as he gained possession of her body.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE OPERATION

The next day was an anxious one for Wilson. At eleven o'clock he drove Désirée round to the nursing home. There he left her, knowing there would be very little likelihood of seeing her before the following morning.

The operation was to take place that afternoon.

After lunch he fidgeted round the hotel vestibule, and in and out of the great hall, staring aimlessly into the little shop windows surrounding it, and in a fever of anxiety awaited a telephone message from the specialist.

At about five o'clock one reached him, saying everything was satisfactory. He asked when he might see the patient, and was told that no visitors would be allowed before the next afternoon.

At four the following day Wilson was at the nursing home. He was shown into a big, dim room, where the doctor greeted him, and a white-clad nurse hovered over a bed in the darkest corner.

"The anæsthetic has tried our patient severely," the doctor commented. "She's in a very poor state of health —almost as if she'd been half-starved and utterly neglected all her life," he went on, looking at Wilson as if hoping for some light on the matter. "But with care and attention she'll soon be as healthy and strong as you could expect a girl of her rather over-bred, nervous type to be."

There was a note in the doctor's voice that suggested he, himself, would have preferred some one more robust and less blue-blooded. Wilson resented the tone. It cast a slur on his princess. He felt like saying his own blood was red enough and his own health robust enough to satisfy anybody, and that, between them, he and Désirée would about strike an average. But a soft little voice said *"Mon ami,"* with an eager note of welcome, and then he had thoughts for nothing else.

Accustomed now to the gloom, Wilson crossed to the bed.

Limp and white among a fluff of soft pillows Désirée lay, her eyes bandaged, a long golden plait on either side of her thin face, her hands lying weak as a baby's on the coverlet.

All afternoon she had been waiting for his voice—the voice of the god who had invaded her darkness, dispelling the terrors that beset her, bringing with him the gift of light.

High-born and fastidious, she wanted no man's love, no man's kisses, except those of the one she was pleased to bow her head before and call "master."

She waited, submissive, hoping the god would kiss her, as he had once done—the tender, passionate caress that thrilled and frightened her, yet left her wanting to feel the pressure of his lips again.

But no kiss was given.

Instead, there was the light, careful touch of his finger on her cheek and his kind voice said:

"Well, Désirée?"

She smiled at him shyly. Then she took the hand that caressed her and pressed it on her heart, since he had

said she must not kiss it, holding it there with her own two hands.

Wilson did not stop her. He kept on looking down at her, feeling the throb of her heart beneath his hand—the heart of his abject slave, had he but known it, overflowing with gratitude, tender, passionate, and true.

He was thinking of the time, two or three weeks hence, when those bandaged eyes would rest on him full of sight, when he would be something more than a shadow.

Then his imagination got to work again, as it used to in years gone by, when he was a small, shabby boy and he and the princess were all in all to one another.

If only the fairy tale would come true! If only she would stoop to love him, once she had seen him! Then one day he might come to her as she lay weak and white in bed. There would be no bandage on her eyes then. It would not be his hand she nursed on her breast, but a tiny morsel of humanity, with a fluffy head—their first-born—and she would say:

"Oh, look, John!" in a weak, excited voice, full of surprise and delight at the miracle they had accomplished between them.

Strong man as he was, the thought set him trembling. In an anxious, longing manner he watched her—the girl he loved, who had never seen him.

As Wilson stood there worrying about his personal appearance, and lack of breeding, looking at the two little hands that held one of his pressed against a soft, warm breast, it did not strike him to consider that if Désirée had had eyes to see with when they first met, he might have had no chance at all. Had she even deigned to look in his direction, in all probability she would have seen only a short, thickset, commonplace man who was

wildly infatuated with herself, who put himself in her way on every possible occasion, and whose attentions she would have resented. She might never have known the real John Wilson, the honest, upright, just, and kindly man that lived beneath the plain exterior.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MACHINATIONS

That evening, when Wilson went into the dining-room of his hotel, among the people assembled there he saw Eugene de Gilbert. Wondering what the latter wanted, Wilson watched him. He had no fears on Désirée's account. Where she was concerned he had taken every precaution. At the nursing home he had given instructions that no one, no matter what relationship he might claim to the patient, was to be admitted to see her. Wolf now lived at the home, sleeping every night in Désirée's room, and day and night Wilson paid private detectives to watch the place, so that there was no fear of her being kidnaped, for he had a feeling that the Gilberts would not rest until they had either the girl or the necklace. And as Désirée was what Wilson set most store on, he thought more about her safety than about that of her heirloom.

After dinner, as he sat in the big hall, he noticed Eugene was still in the hotel. However, the latter made no attempt to speak, ignoring Wilson as completely as though he had never met him.

The previous day Wilson had had a further round with Bassino, who had come to the hotel hot on Désirée's trail, only to find her gone. Wilson had threatened to horsewhip him if he dared as much as speak to her again, and Bassino had retired, but whether for good it was as yet impossible to say.

At first Wilson connected Eugene's presence with the Brazilian, deeming him some emissary from the latter. But as the evening passed without Eugene addressing him, Wilson put the idea out of his head.

But if Eugene de Gilbert did not claim Wilson's acquaintance in any way, he kept a sharp eye on his doings, especially in the dining-room, and particularly on the bottle of wine he drank.

Generally speaking, Wilson had a small bottle of Burgundy with his lunch and another with his dinner. This methodical little habit of his Eugene silently cursed. He wished Wilson would leave half his luncheon wine to be carried over to dinner. He had an excellent reason for wishing this.

Before Eugene had been twenty-four hours in the hotel he had discovered where Wilson's room was, and he had learned that the Englishman always slept with his door locked.

For a week Eugene lived at the big hotel, spending money he could ill afford, at each lunch watching Wilson as a hungry spider watches a fly hovering just beyond its web.

Assured of Désirée's safety, Wilson did not trouble himself much about Eugene. The way he had outmaneuvered the Gilberts, perhaps, had left him a trifle swollen-headed where they were concerned.

Haunted by the thought of what might happen when Désirée saw him, Wilson was at the nursing home as often as he was allowed there. Every afternoon was spent with the girl, reading and talking to her; a Désirée no longer in bed, but sitting up with bandaged eyes. He brought her every sort of expensive fruit and flower, trying to bind her closer to him before the bandages were

removed. He gave her everything he could think of in the way of costly little trifles—everything except the one thing she wanted, the pressure of his lips on hers.

Eugene de Gilbert had been eight days in the hotel before the opportunity he was waiting for arrived.

Then one day at lunch Wilson drank only half his wine. When the meal was over, in an abstracted manner he corked up the bottle. In the ordinary course of events it would appear at dinner.

Eugene watched his doings with covert eagerness. After Wilson had left the dining-room Eugene sat with his eyes on the half-empty bottle, as if all his hopes were centered on it.

When all the other guests had gone he still lingered at his table, with coffee and liqueur at his elbow, smoking a cigarette as with pencil and paper he appeared to be working out some system for breaking the bank at Monte Carlo, an occupation the waiters understood and respected. One by one they vanished also, until the only people in the big room were Eugene and the waiter who attended to his table.

Then he looked up suddenly from his engrossing occupation.

"Hello," he said, addressing the waiter, "am I the last? Don't wait if you want your lunch," he went on casually. "I shan't want anything else except peace and quiet to work out my system."

The man turned away. Eugene waited until he was safely out of the room, then he got up and went over to Wilson's table.

Quickly he uncorked the bottle, dropped a few tablets into the wine, and corked it up again. Then, drinking off his coffee and liqueur, he strolled leisurely from the room.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE THEFT

That night the Count de Gilbert dined with his son. He ate very little of the elaborate dinner spread before him. Every now and again he glanced surreptitiously in Wilson's direction, anxiety on his face when the other first tasted his wine, relief when he saw the bottle empty.

When the meal was over they both followed Wilson into the hall, and sat watching him stealthily.

The drug was not one that worked quickly. It took hold of its victim slowly, insidiously. As the evening wore on, Wilson was conscious of feeling drowsy, but he paid no heed to the matter. Since Désirée had come into his life he had had quite a few sleepless nights, especially latterly, and had he given any thought to the matter he would have put down his drowsiness to lack of sleep. But he was thinking that in a week's time Désirée's eyes would be uncovered, and in the dim light of a shaded room he would have to meet her face to face. If she shrank from him, then all joy and sweetness would vanish from his life. He tried not to let his mind dwell on the matter, but to think instead of the warm welcome that was always his lot; of the fact that his gifts were never refused, but always thanked for in a soft, grateful voice.

Perhaps an hour earlier than usual Wilson made his way to the lift, stifling a yawn as he went, unaware of the two pairs of eyes that were watching him so intently.

Once in the privacy of his own bedroom, he yawned more freely. But, sleepy and tired as he was feeling, he did not forget to slip "The Necklace of Tears" under his pillow. Nor did he forget to press his lips to the ragged remains of a carnation which he carried in his pocket-book, the flower Désirée had given him that first morning in the ruined castle.

Then he got into bed and switched off the light, not to toss on the necklace until the small hours of the morning, as he usually did, but to fall sound asleep almost immediately.

Down in the hall the Gilberts waited.

Once Wilson had left the place a strained expression crept through the usually debonair look on both their faces.

Espying Eugene, Mrs. Green bore down on him. He was not in a flirtatious mood that evening, but he remembered his pose sufficiently to say:

"Have you had the luck to hear anything of your bracelet?"

The question made his father fidget.

Finding them both distrait and self-absorbed, Mrs. Green went off in search of more amusing companions, thinking to herself that Eugene de Gilbert was very "off song" that evening. She had accosted him several times during his stay in the hotel; although he never openly avoided her, he dodged her as much as possible. Once or twice she had mentioned the Countess de Mailly, the beautiful and charming girl of whom she had had charge for a couple of days. She told him about the successful operation. And she wondered how the girl came to be stranded there, and how John Wilson had come to have charge of her.

Eugene listened to all she had to say, but he never claimed any relationship to Désirée.

But of the two things in Wilson's possession, he had quickly come to see it would be much easier to get hold of the necklace than the girl.

About an hour after Wilson had retired Eugene looked at his father.

"I think we might set to work now," he said, rising.

The Count said nothing at all. He rose also, and in his son's wake made towards the lift. But his steps dragged; he walked in a feeble, decrepit manner, as if he suddenly had grown old.

Taking the lift, they gave the number of Eugene's room. Once there, as soon as the lift had descended, they made their way towards the staircase, down a couple of flights, and on to the floor where Wilson's quarters were situated.

The bedroom door was of the automatic-locking kind, which is unlocked on entering, and which locks itself on being closed, to be opened again without any trouble by a handle on the inside.

When they reached Wilson's room, Eugene produced a bunch of skeleton keys. Whilst his father kept watch, he stealthily tried one after the other in the lock. The corridor was deserted. It was the hour when the "early-to-beds" had already retired, and the night birds had not yet thought of going to their rooms. Should anyone have questioned their actions, the two confederates could have said they were knocking at a friend's door.

Within a few minutes Eugene had found a key to fit; then they both slipped into the room, closing the door quietly behind them.

Once inside, they switched on the light, gave a sharp

glance at Wilson sleeping the heavy sleep of the drugged, and then quietly set about their investigations.

They were not long in finding the necklace.

Understanding the nature of the man with whom he was dealing, Eugene had a good idea where to look for any possession of Désirée's that was in Wilson's keeping.

"We'll look under his pillow first," he whispered, making straight for the bed.

With a stealthy hand he felt under Wilson's dark head, and drew out a little washleather bag. Opening it, he slipped the necklace into his hand. It lay there, a pool of light, winking maliciously at the covetous eyes that were glued on it.

With a sigh of relief Eugene slipped it into his pocket, and threw the washleather bag on the floor.

Then he leant over the bed and addressed the drugged man.

"You're welcome to Désirée, Mr. Wilson, now we have the necklace. But she won't like you so well when she has eyes to see with. She is fastidious, my little cousin. You'll lose all round on this deal, my friend."

So saying, he turned from the bed.

Switching off the electric light, they opened the door an inch or so, and stood listening. Then, satisfied there was no one about, they slipped out.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE ESCAPE

The Gilberts had their plans cut and dried. Should the necklace fall into their hands, they had made all arrangements for getting off with it. They had hired a motor-boat. Once they had their booty their one idea was to get away as quickly as possible, and with the least fuss. They had arranged to go to Marseilles by water, to catch a liner to America, and dispose of the necklace there.

Because of Désirée they knew Wilson would not make any hue and cry, lest her connection with "The Triple Alliance" should come to light. For various reasons the duel had been a silent one, and whoever lost had to take his beating in silence.

To get out of the hotel to the spot where their craft was anchored was only a matter of minutes. Not much more than a quarter of an hour after the robbery the throb of their engine was stirring the echoes of the muffled bay.

Both men were expert drivers. Once aboard, Eugene took the wheel. His eyes were the younger and sharper. He had arranged to drive until daylight, when his father would relieve him.

They had no sooner started than the old Count said in a thin, quavering voice:

"The necklace, Eugene. Let me see it again."

Intent on escape, it had not been out of the younger man's pocket since leaving Wilson's bedroom, and he was as anxious as his father to see the fruit of their schemings.

He drew it out, scanning it in the faint starlight, and it flashed and wriggled like a snake of fire in the blue night.

"With care, *mon père,* it should last us for the rest of our lives. But we must avoid Monte Carlo, or it may melt as quickly as Bassino's fifty thousand dollars did."

Then he handed it to his father.

The old man took it, holding it in crooked miser claws.

"It's more than thirty years since I've had it in my hands, Eugene. Thirty years. And all that time it has been glittering before me."

"Well, it won't be in our hands much more than thirty days, I hope."

"You will sell it?" the old Count cried, a stifled note of anguish in his voice.

"What else have we got it for?" Eugene enquired.

His father cast a quick glance at him, full of hatred and malice. And now that he had the necklace in his hands, he crooned over it like a man over his best beloved.

"Oh, you beauty! You beauty!" he said again and again.

And in the thick night the diamonds flashed like some evil light hovering over the boat.

"You'd better put the thing into your pocket and get some sleep," Eugene remarked presently.

With a stealthy, furtive glance at his son, the old Count curled himself up in the bottom of the boat. But he did not go to sleep. He lay with the necklace in the crook of his arm, touching it and stroking it tenderly with

skinny old fingers, as if it were some live thing that he loved.

Eugene paid no heed to him. All his attention was needed for guiding the little craft through the muffled, misty blueness of Mediterranean night. He pressed the boat forward, his mind not dwelling on the beauty and perfection of the necklace but on all he would do with the money it would realize.

The night wore on, a night of blueness and stealthy lapping, with a blaze of white stars overhead, and tiny yellow dots winking on the distant coast-line. And the throb of the engine drowned the old Count's voice crooning to his treasure.

The hours passed one by one; then into the soft indigo of the night there came a faint pink tinge that rapidly grew red, as the rosy lips of morning yawned over a sleepy earth. The indigo grew less dense. The stars lost their light. The dark veil lifted rapidly, becoming instead a wreathing, pearly mist. Great shafts of orange, carmine, and glowing green shot suddenly across the sky, turning the gray mist into a rainbow. Then over the rim of the world the sun rose, an arc of gold.

Eugene greeted it with a wide yawn. Stretching out his foot, he touched his father.

"Come, *mon cher,* it's your turn," he said.

"Eugene," an old voice whined, "you won't sell her, will you? She's such a beauty."

Eugene laughed.

"Why, you're as bad as the old Count de Mailly, living on bread and radishes and keeping a fortune to look at. No, *mon père,* as a diet, bread and radishes don't appeal to me."

The elder Gilbert cast a stealthy, malignant glance at

his son. However, he made no comment. Putting the necklace into his pocket, he got to his feet to take his turn at the wheel.

When his father was settled, Eugene stretched himself along the bottom of the boat, and very soon was sound asleep.

Once assured his son was sleeping, the old Count drew out his treasure and laid it on the seat before him. He smiled at it fondly, and then glanced at the recumbent form of his son.

"He says he will sell you, my beauty," he whispered. "But will he? It's not like selling Désirée; she was only a girl. Only wait. I'll save *you*. We shall not be parted, we who have loved so truly for so long. Thirty years since we first met. For thirty years I've lived with your image before me. How I've planned and schemed to possess you! What if one girl's eyes were kept dark for the sake of the light in yours. And now he would sell you, the fiend!"

With skinny fingers he caressed the necklace again.

"But I shan't let him, my beauty. Trust me. I'll save you."

Letting go the steering-wheel, he rubbed his hands together in an ecstacy of mad triumph and cunning.

Then he leant forward and opened a valve in the bottom of the boat.

. . . . . .

Eugene was sleeping as soundly as if he were drugged, worn out with his night at the wheel and the tension of the evening.

As he slept he dreamt he was in a bath, the water creeping gradually upwards and upwards until it was in his mouth.

He awoke, choking and spluttering, to find himself lying in a boat half full of water—a boat that was gradually settling down with the soft stealthy movement of a craft about to sink.

He sat up quickly.

Opposite, a horrible old figure crouched, its mouth dribbling, its eyes blazing with madness, its claw-like hands holding "The Necklace of Tears," crooning over it, crying, and kissing it.

In a moment Eugene was on his feet, with a suddenness that made the boat sway ominously. He had grasped the situation. Delight at having the necklace he had schemed for and coveted so many years had turned his father's brain. The madman had opened the valve at the bottom of the boat; the craft was sinking rapidly, and the coast ten miles away.

With a quick movement Eugene made towards the valve, to try to close it. Guessing his intention, his father fell on him, wrestling with the strength of madness to keep him away from his purpose.

"You shan't do it," he screamed. "I'll drown you rather than let you sell her."

In the struggle Eugene got the necklace, but he did not reach the valve. Under the weight of water and their wrestling the boat suddenly, softly subsided.

For a few moments nothing showed on the misty, milky blueness of the sea except a few bubbles.

Then the two men came to the surface fighting like cats.

With an effort the younger pushed off his opponent, and started swimming towards the distant coast, holding the necklace in one hand.

With a slower movement his father followed.

"Give her back to me, Eugene. Give her back to me,"

he screamed again and again, in a voice that as the minutes passed grew fainter and fainter.

But farther and farther ahead, like an evil, laughing thing on the surface of the water, the necklace flashed and glittered.

There was a last faint, imploring cry, a gasp, and a gurgle, and the Count de Gilbert sank to rise no more. A ray of sunshine caught the necklace, and it winked more gayly, more wickedly than ever. To the end it had eluded the man who loved *it* more than anything else on this earth, who had been false to his trust, and who had done worse than murder in a vain endeavor to possess it.

Heedless of his father's death, Eugene swam on, towards a coast that seemed to get ever more distant.

At the end of two hours he clutched the necklace as a drowning man clutches a straw.

Then he sank, to come to the surface again, and sink again, to appear and disappear, and finally to appear no more.

In death his hands relaxed. Like a streak of evil light the necklace sank, gliding swiftly to its last home in the depths of the sea, twinkling maliciously as it went.

From Eugene, too, it had taken what he loved the best —his wicked, worthless life.

CHAPTER XXXVII

REALIZATION

The next morning Wilson awoke feeling very heavy about the head. Yawning, he sat up. Then his yawn stopped half way, and he stayed with his gaze fixed on something near the bed.

Lying on the floor, limp and empty-looking, was the washleather bag in which he always carried Désirée's heritage!

He knew he had put it under his pillow. The sight of it lying there on the floor sent a chill through him. He remembered his unusual drowsiness of the evening before, and the fact that he had slept through the night without once waking, a thing he had not done since Désirée had come into his life.

Quickly he felt under his pillow.

The necklace was gone!

He was out of bed in a moment and picking up the washleather bag. It was empty, as its flat, limp appearance said it would be. In a frenzy he snatched up the pillows, looking in and under them. Then he felt in the pockets of his dress suit which lay on a near-by chair.

His investigations all told the same story—a story he had known and tried not to believe the moment his eyes had alighted on the little bag.

"The Necklace of Tears" had gone!

For some moments he was stupefied by the discovery.

He knew very well who had stolen it. The Gilberts. He knew now why Eugene had been hanging around the hotel for the last week or more. He realized, too, that he had been drugged. How they had managed that he did not know. He did not think about the matter at all. He only knew Désirée's heritage had gone, had been stolen from him, the necklace she had placed in his hands with such perfect faith and trust.

He sat down heavily on the bed and tried to think about the matter rationally. And the more he thought about it the more he realized that he would have to take his beating in silence.

Assuming he found the Gilberts, he could not openly accuse them of stealing the necklace. As Désirée's guardian the Count had a right to have charge of it. He could not explain why he wanted it back without denouncing them, without dragging in "The Triple Alliance" and smirching the girl's good name.

He was tied hand and foot. Moreover, by now the Gilberts would be far enough away. It would be useless to ask Désirée to let him prosecute her guardian. Instinctively he knew she would rather lose her fortune than risk dishonoring her name.

Two hundred thousand pounds! That was what the accursed thing was worth—£200,000, that he with his cocksure ways had allowed to be stolen; £200,000, that Désirée had put into his hands with the faith of a little child.

As Wilson sat on his bed trying to grapple with the problem that beset him the devil came and whispered in his ear again.

She was such a child, so easily deceived, that little girl

who had had no eyes with which to see. He would only have to go to her and say:

"Désirée, I've sold your necklace. It fetched £20,000," and she would believe him.

But he refused to listen to the voice of the tempter.

He had sacrificed her once on the altar of his own stupidity; he was not going to do it again.

There was only one thing to do—he must pay back every penny of that sacred trust, a crushing debt of honor that would ruin him. When he had paid that off, considering the orgy of extravagance he had been indulging in lately, he would not have £500 left in the world.

John Wilson was unnerved.

The wonderful pile of gold for which he had worked so hard and so honestly, the only thing about him that he considered put him on a level with the Countess de Mailly, would be swept away. Without it he dared not aspire to her.

His head fell on his hands.

Why had he put a finger on that accursed necklace? Why had he ever touched the damned thing? Why must he go and meddle in matters that did not concern him? Why had he asked Désirée to let him have charge of it? The Gilberts would have stolen it from her, but that would have been no concern of his.

Wilson's world was very dark just then. The necklace was indeed a "Necklace of Tears" for him, for it seemed to have taken from him what he loved best—Désirée, Countess de Mailly.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

DESPAIR

That day when Mrs. Green came in for lunch she found Wilson in the vestibule, with an air about him as if he might be waiting for her.

"Hello!" she said, before he had time to speak. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"You look a bit hipped."

He looked more than a "bit hipped." He looked positively haggard.

"I've got to go back to England unexpectedly on business," he replied.

Mrs. Green wagged a finger at him.

"So that's it, is it?" she remarked. "And you don't like having to leave the Countess Désirée?"

"I don't," Wilson said truthfully. "And I may not be able to get back again for a month or two," he went on. "I know you're at a loose end until the beginning of May, so I'm going to ask you a favor."

"Ask away," Mrs. Green said with encouragement.

"The Countess will be out and about in another week. I want someone I can trust to look after her, to take her round a bit, and let her see what the world's made of, to keep a foreign bounder called Bassino off her track if he comes round pestering her, to be her guardian and honorary *dame de compagnie* until she has found her feet.

You'd have a good time going round with her, Mrs. Green. She's in the best set, and has £10,000 a year now she's of age."

To go about with a countess was Mrs. Green's idea of heaven, more especially as the countess was a young girl she could mother.

"It's just the sort of job I'm looking for," she said.

She knew now how the two had met, and she assumed that, seeing the girl was utterly neglected, left entirely to the mercy of ignorant servants, Wilson had taken upon himself to look after her and her affairs.

Again Mrs. Green glanced at Wilson, noting anew his worn and haggard appearance, the misery that lurked in his steady brown eyes.

All at once it dawned on her to wonder if "business" were only an excuse; if he had proposed to the girl and had been rejected, and was now taking himself off. He certainly looked as if he had received his death-sentence. A question hovered on her lips. Then she deemed it more diplomatic to say nothing.

After leaving Mrs. Green, Wilson went to the bureau to say he would be leaving that evening. There he found the manager in the act of hanging up the telephone receiver.

"Here's a bit of a tragedy," the latter remarked.

Wilson had no thought except for his own—that henceforth Désirée was so far above him that she could not be grasped at.

"What is it?" he asked absently.

"Did you ever meet a Eugene de Gilbert who has been staying here for the last week? He and his father, the Count de Gilbert, were frequently in the place, and knew all the best people here. They've both been drowned.

I've just had a through telephone message. Their bodies were washed ashore somewhere near Toulon."

A thrill of hope coursed through Wilson.

"That's a bit of hard luck," he said, turning away quickly.

Forgetful of his lunch, he left the hotel, in quest of the interpreter he had employed on a former occasion. Having found his man, with him he went to the police station.

There he spent money he could now ill afford in trying to discover if "The Necklace of Tears" had been found on either of the bodies.

His enquiries proved that nothing of the sort had been heard of, and that it could not have been stolen had it been there, since the corpses had been found by a contingent of sailors from one of the cruisers lying in the bay.

He came away from the police station with the cold comfort of knowing that at least the Gilberts would trouble Désirée no more.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE SACRIFICE

In one of the rooms of the nursing home Désirée sat knitting, and as she knitted she was brooding over the fact that a week hence she would see her friend for the first time. She had but a vague idea what he was like, but, from the first, instinct had told her he was quite different from the other men who had played prominent parts in her life—her uncle and cousin and the millionaire, Bassino.

She knew Wilson was not what she had been brought up to look upon as a "gentleman." He had told her so himself on the occasion of their first meeting, and afterwards her cousin had not forgotten to impress the fact upon her.

To dance with her friend was not like dancing with Mr. Bassino; in the latter case it was like being pressed tightly against a foul, hot, dirty cushion, and it left her sick and suffocated, full of vague, horrible fears. But with her friend it was quite different; then there was only hardness and strength, a nice clean sensation, and a feeling that no matter how close he held her, it would be all right. She never wanted to struggle and get away from him, as she did when she had had to dance with her cousin and Mr. Bassino.

She knew Wilson was not tall, because when they danced together his voice was about on a level with her

ear, not above her head, as Eugene's was. She knew he was broad because on his shoulder she had once found a refuge from her troubles. She knew his hands were large and hard and inclined to be rough-skinned, but they were always kind.

He was sitting with her now, somewhere in the darkness. She could feel his presence, although he was not in a very talkative mood that afternoon. She knitted away industriously, wondering why he was so unusually quiet, feeling too lowly and meek to speak unless spoken to. One does not converse freely with people who can perform miracles.

"Désirée," his voice said presently, a strained note in it, "I can't have you going about thinking yourself a pauper. I've taken the law into my own hands. I've sold your necklace. It fetched £200,000, and I'm going to invest the money for you in good sound English securities."

Wilson expected a flood of reproaches for having dared to part with her heirloom without permission.

However, no reproaches came.

All Désirée thought was that the necklace had gone, and now no harm would fall on her cherished friend.

"Then I shall be able to buy Mrs. Green another bracelet," she remarked, as if £200,000 were no more than that amount of pence.

But she did not add "and pay you back."

She did not want to pay him back. She loved his gifts, not because of their value—she had no idea of that—but merely because he had given them.

"You'll be a rich woman. You'll have at least £10,000 a year."

"Ten thousand pounds a year! Then I shall have as

much money as you," she exclaimed, with a child's delight at equaling a loved friend in some way.

Her words made him wince.

He was a proud man, too proud to ask a woman to marry him when he could not support her, too humble to imagine that he might aspire to Désirée now his fortune had gone.

He lapsed into silence again. She went on knitting, yet as she knitted she felt the tension on the man.

"What is it, *mon ami?*" she asked presently, an anxious note in her voice. "I feel that something is worrying you."

Something was worrying him. He sat in agony, feasting his eyes on the girl—all the beauty and the innocence and the gentle sweetness he wanted; for which he had worked hard and kept straight, for the sake of an ideal which he had once thought would never take form, which had taken form, and which he had lost through his own stupidity and folly.

"I have to go to England unexpectedly on business," he said in as casual a voice as he could muster. "I must start to-night, but I'm leaving Mrs. Green to take care of you until I—come back."

He had no intention of coming back, of letting Désirée see him as he really was, and a pauper into the bargain. But he was not going to tell her so. She liked him, as a neglected, loveless child would like anyone who happened to be kind to it. To think she was losing him would make her fret. But when her bandages were removed, in the new world revealed to her and the new friends she made in it, his memory would soon grow less vivid.

"Shall you be away for very long?" she asked, a sharp note of anxiety in her voice.

"You'll be able to see when I—come back," he said, avoiding her question.

Désirée imagined his absence would be a matter of only a week or two, and a look of relief passed over her face.

Wilson saw his deception had succeeded.

He tried to keep up the farce, to put aside his own loss and troubles, to talk to the girl in his usual brotherly manner. But before long he found himself just sitting in silence, looking at her.

It was the last time he would be with her. To-night he would pass out of her life for ever. He was no longer John Wilson, Esquire, a successful business man, so pleased with himself and his success that he had dared to aspire to the Countess de Mailly. He was John Wilson, a bankrupt and a fool, yet not fool enough to ask for things that were beyond him.

Presently Désirée put down her work and came to his side, hovering round him, touching him gently, as her phantom used to when he was a small boy and unhappy.

"I feel that something *is* the matter," she said. "Is there nothing I can do?"

"It's only business worries, little girl," he answered, watching her with tortured eyes.

Tea came—a silent meal. He looked after the girl's wants, but he forgot his own.

Soon after the meal was over he rose to go. Désirée got up also.

He took her hands, holding them for the last time.

"Good-by, my little girl," he said hoarsely.

She raised her face, with a timid, hopeful movement. But it was her hands that Wilson kissed, not her lips.

Then she heard the door close behind him.

Beneath the bandages Désirée's tears started oozing. He had gone for one long week, perhaps two, without giving her the one gift she wanted.

To Wilson, making his way out of the house, it seemed the fairy tale was ended. The dragons were slain, the ogre disposed of, but the princess would fall to the lot of another. All he had got out of the deal was poverty, and the ragged remains of a carnation.

PART THREE

CHAPTER I

THE ICE MAIDEN

At a large house in the center of Paris a garden party was taking place. Behind the mansion was a grassy stretch, so quiet and peaceful that it might have been miles away in the country. High walls surrounded it. To heighten them still further and keep out prying eyes was ivy-grown trellis. Great sycamores screened the gray of the adjacent dwellings. In the midst of the garden a fountain splashed into a sunken basin dotted with water lilies, where goldfish swam. A bright border of flowers flared out against the dingy walls; quaint statues stood at the corners of the graveled paths, and here and there were wide stone seats.

The mansion stood remote and aloof from its plebeian neighbors, with shallow stone steps leading down into the screened pleasance. Dotted about the grass were tables on which silver and china flashed in the mild gold of an early June sun, and gilded chairs.

On one of the stone seats a girl sat, a young man beside her. He had eyes for nothing but his companion, but her gaze was fixed on a mass of blue lobelia that edged the border.

Time passed, and she said nothing, in spite of his impassioned stare.

"Your eyes are as blue as that lobelia, Countess," he remarked presently. "But why don't you turn them on me, instead of wasting their beauty on those unappreciative, common little flowers?"

Her attention came to him with the grave, critical gaze of a thoughtful child.

"Once I had not eyes with which to see flowers," she answered.

"And now you have eyes that drive men mad," he said hoarsely. "Countess—Désirée——" he began.

She got up quickly, with a slightly disdainful air, as if she knew what was coming.

"No, don't go," he implored. "Stay and listen to what I have to say."

"I know what you're going to say, and I don't want to listen."

He laughed to hide his chagrin.

"So it's true then, 'Ice Maiden,' that you turn us down at the rate of two a day?"

Hastily she walked away from him, to be pounced upon almost immediately by another of his sex, and then to be swallowed up by the crowd that surged in and out of the house, up and down the steps, around and among the scattered chairs and tables.

The gathering represented the most exclusive set in Paris, all members of the old nobility, and the only untitled people present were foreigners.

Perhaps the happiest person there was Mrs. Green. She sat with a duchess on one side of her, a baroness on the other. In appearance she had improved vastly since the time John Wilson had gone back to poverty and left Désirée in her care. She was less obviously painted and powdered and tinted, less youthful in her attire, more

quietly dressed. She wore a dark blue silk dress, a wide hat to match that had no trimming beyond a sweep of white osprey feathers, and on one of her pretty wrists a sapphire bracelet flashed, a present her youthful charge had insisted on giving her soon after their arrival in Paris.

So attired, she did not look a vulgar fifty-two masquerading as twenty, but a jolly and attractive forty, which was the most a woman of her type and years could hope to attain.

In halting French she was conversing amicably with her neighbors, both of whom were about her own age, and both of whom possessed marriageable sons.

As Mrs. Green talked to her companions, blissfully happy in having attained social heights once undreamt of, she kept a watch on two figures in the throng.

One was that of a short, flashily-dressed, foreign-looking man who was dogging the steps of a graceful, slender girl who, with a little bevy of admirers, moved slowly through the crowd.

Bassino did not look either as stout or as aggressive as in the days when he had had a round with Wilson over the possession of the Countess de Mailly. He was almost thin and woefully haggard—a man consumed by a devouring and hopeless passion.

"Monsieur Bassino has not taken his *congé* with the good grace of our young men," the Baroness remarked presently, noting the girl and her shadow. "He is an excellent *parti*—one of the best in Paris—yet they say she has refused him, not once, but a dozen times."

"Can you be surprised at this infatuation?" Mrs. Green put in. "Désirée grows more beautiful every day."

"And more cold," the Duchess said with a sigh. "Always and to everybody 'The Ice Maiden.'"

"Not to your charming Victor surely?" the Baroness purred sympathetically, yet there was an undercurrent of malicious delight in her well-modulated voice. "Not surely to the handsomest man in Paris?"

"The poor boy is frantic. I could make a match for him now with Miss Lambert of Boston," the Duchess replied sorrowfully. "She has money but no looks. But Victor is so stupid. He says he has done with women—that he will go abroad and work for his living! Did you ever hear such folly? And all because 'The Ice Maiden' has refused him."

"She refuses everybody," Mrs. Green put in, by way of consolation.

"But it is different in Victor's case," the Duchess replied. "I was at school with Désirée's mother."

Mrs. Green did not quite see why this fact should forward Victor's suit, but she decided she had not the French point of view, so she said nothing.

Her attention went again to Désirée, whom fashionable Paris had christened "The Ice Maiden."

Two months ago she had brought the girl to Paris. Before a month had passed she and her charge were the most sought after people in the most exclusive and aristocratic set. Désirée was the beauty and the sensation of the season—a girl who had been blind until she was twenty-one, when she suddenly inherited both sight and money.

Exclusive French mothers with eligible sons suddenly remembered they had been at school with Désirée's mother, or that they had known her father, or were in some way distantly connected with herself. They would have taken her from beneath Mrs. Green's motherly wing and installed her in their own homes, but Désirée refused

their offers, preferring to live in an hotel with her homely chaperone.

All sorts of romantic tales were afloat about the young and beautiful heiress—how some man had met her quite by chance, a blind girl wandering about all alone in a little hamlet in the distant Maritime Alps, with a diamond necklace worth millions of francs about her neck; how he had declared she could be cured, and had taken her to a specialist; how he had sold her necklace for a fabulous sum, and then disappeared.

Whether this was true or not, Paris did not know. But it knew the Countess de Mailly owed her sight and her riches to an Englishman, because she had said so herself.

Of that Englishman Désirée had often talked during the first few weeks after her operation. Like a little child she had clung to Mrs. Green, wondering why her friend stayed away, like a little child asking for him day after day.

"Why didn't Mr. Wilson stay until I was better?" was one of her questions.

"To tell you the truth, my dear, I suspect he was fidgeting about his business," Mrs. Green had said one day. "Some men are like that. Business is more to them than wife or child."

After that Désirée had ceased to ask for her friend.

It seemed to her he had come and done what he considered his duty towards someone helpless and friendless whom Fate had thrown across his path. Then, in a cold, hard, English way, he had gone, wanting no thanks, no reward. Once or twice stiff, brief notes had come from him in connection with the disposal of her fortune—

notes she could neither read nor reply to, that had to be answered by another.

Mrs. Green had engaged a staid and capable governess for her charge. Every morning the lovely young heiress whom Paris fêted and courted and flattered had to do her lessons as if she were still in the schoolroom. She learnt with amazing rapidity. Every moment that could be snatched from a whirl of gayeties was spent in study, to achieve one end—to be able to read and reply to those brief, curt notes herself.

As Désirée moved among the fashionable throng, cold, proud, and disdainful, Wilson's last note was tucked away beneath her dress—a note that all the passionate gratitude and worship within her heart could not warm into one single suggestion of affection or love. There was nothing in it but the voice of cold, hard duty.

It ran:

"My Dear Désirée,—Everything connected with the disposal of your money is now settled. It is put into excellent securities, and will bring in a steady income of £10,470 a year. I have arranged with a well-known firm of solicitors to look after your affairs, and you should hear from them by this post.

"Hoping you are quite better now and enjoying yourself in Paris, with kind regards to yourself and Mrs. Green,

"I remain,
"Yours sincerely,
"John Wilson."

That note she had been able to read for herself. She had answered it, too, and the reply was now on its way to England, written with painful care in a large, round, childish hand.

"My Dear Friend,—It is most kind of you to take so much trouble on my account, and I can never thank you enough for all you have done for me. I am sorry I have not been able to write before and say for myself how grateful I am, but you will quite understand why I could not.

"You must not imagine that I think only of money. I say this because in all your letters you talk of nothing else. One true friend is worth more to me than all the money in the world, and I would rather have my sight than the fortune you have gained for me by selling 'The Necklace of Tears.' And I always remember that I owe my sight, my riches, and my good name to *you*.

"Perhaps some day, when you can find time to leave your business, you will come to France again. I shall look forward to that day. I want to meet you face to face and thank you personally for all you have done for me.

"Always yours most gratefully,
"Désirée de Mailly."

As the girl sauntered about the garden with her small troop of admirers her thoughts were with none of them. They were with the letter she had posted off to Wilson, a note with a tacit invitation in it, that she hoped he would see and understand.

Tired of the men who dogged her steps, presently she went into the house. By skillful strategy she shook off her cavaliers and sought a refuge in the library. From one of the shelves she took a volume of an encyclopedia, and, seating herself in a deep chair, set about in quest of the knowledge that darkness had kept from her.

However, she was not left long in peace.

Within a few minutes the door opening made her look round. On seeing who the intruder was she got up quickly.

"Well, you see, Countess," a thick voice said, "you can't shake me as easily as you do the rest of the crowd."

Désirée made no reply. She stood toying rather nervously with a long chain of ivory beads, watching Bassino with beautiful, grave eyes out of which she tried to keep dislike and loathing.

He came to her side, looking at her in a hungry, hopeless manner.

"At least it's you I want, not your money," he remarked presently.

"I know that," she answered quietly.

"Won't you let that stand in my favor?" he asked, despair and passion in his voice. "Désirée, if only you'd have me, you could wipe your feet on me for the rest of your life, and I'd reckon myself the luckiest man alive."

The passion in his voice and eyes made her move from him with a little shudder of repulsion.

He laughed wildly.

"Why do you always steer away like that when I come near you," he asked bitterly, "as if I'd leave a dirty mark on you if I touched you? Good God! If ever a man had his sins burnt out of him by a raging fire, it's me in my mad love for you."

His words only sent her farther away, edging, not too obviously, towards the door.

"Oh, yes," he went on in a wild, distraught manner, "you're going to run away from me now, as you've always done since our first meeting. But before you go I want to tell you one thing. I know when I'm beat. I know when I'm done. And I'm starting back to Rio tomorrow."

A look of relief crossed Désirée's face, and Bassino was quick to see it.

"'Good riddance!' Say it," he continued bitterly. "You can't hurt me more than you've done already."

His hand went to his pocket. He drew out a check representing in francs 50,000 dollars, and signed in a large, round, unformed hand "Désirée de Mailly."

"You sent me this," he said thickly, "the price I paid your uncle for you. Do you think 50,000 dollars is going to compensate me for losing you? By hell, no, Désirée! That's what I shall do with this and every check of the sort you send me."

He drew a match from his pocket and, striking it, set fire to the check.

With grave eyes she watched him.

She was not afraid of him now. He was no longer an unseen horror that her uncle would thrust upon her, had sold her to!

She loathed Bassino as much as ever, but sorrow had taken the place of fear.

"I'm very sorry," she said.

"It's not your pity I want, but you," he started, in a wild, impassioned manner. "You, in my arms, all night, all day. Désirée, if only——"

She turned quickly and fled, wanting nothing now but to get away from him, to keep out of his sight until he had really gone.

Leaving the house, she went back to the garden, towards the spot where Mrs. Green was sitting.

Her approach brought sweet, artificial smiles to the Baroness's worldly mouth, and she shook a delicate forefinger reprovingly at the girl.

"Why have you been so cruel to my Jacques?" she asked. "He tells me you refused to wear the roses he sent you for last night's ball."

Désirée's mouth curled disdainfully.

"I have so many flowers given to me nowadays I can't wear them all."

"Whose did you wear then?" the Baroness asked sharply.

"Those *maman* bought me to go with my dress," the girl answered, smiling at Mrs. Green.

"Shall we go now?" she continued, addressing her chaperone. "I'm so tired, and there's a ball again to-night."

Mrs. Green was on her feet at once, ready to do anything her charge suggested, beaming at the *"maman"* that came so naturally to those proud young lips before all these titles—to her, Mrs. Green, who, in her young days, had sold ribbons behind a counter!

"Why, yes, my dear, I'm ready any time you are," she answered.

Once they were in the privacy of the motor which Mrs. Green had hired during their stay in Paris Désirée said a trifle petulantly:

"Maman, why didn't the Baroness du Châlet remember her husband was my father's second cousin when I was poor and blind?"

Mrs. Green took the girl's small hand into her plump one and patted it consolingly.

"My dear, you must learn to take the world as it is."

"I've learnt that the people who were kind to me in the days when I was poor and afflicted were the ones who can lay no claim to me—who were not at school with my mother, or friends of my father's, or distant connections of my own. They were not of my own nation even. I'm not stupid if I *am* ignorant. These people only come now because I'm rich. They are not

like you and Mr. Wilson, who were kind to me when I had nothing. *Maman,* is Mr. Wilson anything like Jacques du Châlet?" she finished.

Mrs. Green was used to such questions. They told her who was the last man to lay his heart at Désirée's feet.

"No, Mr. Wilson is quite different."

"Better looking?"

"I've often told you good looks are not Wilson's great point. He's strong-looking, and when you've said that you've said all. And he's come up from nothing, and looks as if he had risen."

Désirée had heard of people going from something to nothing; there were several cases among her own connections—the Gilberts, for instance. But she had never heard of any of her own immediate relatives coming from nothing to something.

"It must be very wonderful to get up from nothing," she remarked.

Mrs. Green, however, did not seem to think it so very marvelous.

"I know lots who have done it," she replied, "me and Mr. Green among the number. Why, there was a day when I served in a draper's shop, and he was an errand boy at a steel works. I wouldn't dream of telling this to everybody, my dear," she went on confidentially, "but you're so different. You like me for what I am, not for what I have, and you'd be just as nice to me if I hadn't a penny."

"Yes," Désirée said in a meditating manner, "that's why, awful as Mr. Bassino is, I can't quite ignore him when he speaks to me, since I always remember that when he first asked me to marry him I was poor and blind. I can't accuse him of wanting me for my money. He's

starting back for South America to-morrow," she finished with an air of relief.

Then she lapsed into silence, thinking of the other man who had invaded her darkness and had befriended her when she was poor and of no account.

She sat on, with his cold little note pressed against her heart—a queen among women; a ruler of men by right of her wondrous beauty; too proud to run after the one man she wanted—a man who preferred his business to herself.

Speculatively Mrs. Green watched her, wondering if Désirée were regretting having refused John Wilson now life had shown her the world's lack of sincerity.

CHAPTER II

MRS. GREEN RECEIVES A LETTER

Mrs. Green was sitting up in bed, her boudoir cap askew on her head, a breakfast tray on a little table beside her, an open letter in her hand.

As she read it a look of dismay came to her face.

"Well, I never did!" she exclaimed when the pages were finished.

"What is it, *maman?* What has happened now?" Désirée asked.

"Well, I never did," Mrs. Green said again. "But isn't that just like a man! Never any pleasing them. If you're there they let you see you're not wanted. Then, when you go away and start enjoying yourself, this comes along. Just read it, my dear," she finished, handing the letter to Désirée.

The girl took the letter and read it through slowly.

It was from Mr. Green, insisting that his wife come home at once, complaining that he was tired of pouring out his own breakfast coffee, and that the boys said it was not much use having a mother if she was going to spend the rest of her life gallivanting over the Continent with duchesses and countesses and the like. Not that any one of them grudged her enjoying herself, but there was reason in all things; and no married woman ought to desert her husband and family for six months on end. The boys were complaining that the bureau drawers were

always untidy nowadays, that their socks came back in odd ones masquerading as pairs, that their handkerchiefs all got mixed up, and Arthur, on more than one occasion, had run his best shirts to earth in his father's wardrobe—all things that never happened when their mother was at home.

And there had been days—days of dire calamity—when he, Mr. Green, on coming home for lunch, had not been able to find the morning paper! Cook was managing the housekeeping and all that very well—there was nothing at which to grumble on that score—but she did not seem to realize how it tried a man's temper to come home and find the morning paper missing—deliberately torn up to light a fire, and without a word of apology!

There was no harm in her chaperoning that wonder-child, the Countess de Mailly, for a bit, but the boys hoped it would not give her ideas above their own set at home. And she must remember that her own sons had some claim on her, even if the Countess did call her *"maman,"* and the boys only called her by the sensible English word "mother."

He, Mr. Green, and the boys were glad she, Mrs. Green, had been such a success socially. That last photo she had sent of herself in what she said was a dark blue silk dress and the big hat with the feather was a stunner, and she looked quite the "grand lady." But it was time now that she gave a thought to them slaving away at home for her to buy hats with a bit of a feather in them that cost £30 apiece.

If she was afraid to come home because of the bracelet that was stolen, then she need not be. No one was going to throw it up to her. It was very kind of the Countess de Mailly to have given her another, but it was not at all

necessary. He, Mr. Green, could afford to give her all the bracelets she wanted, and allow for the loss of one or two when she happened to be traveling in foreign parts.

The letter ended up with a frantic cry that he might as well have no wife at all as one who appeared to have made up her mind to spend the rest of her life on the Continent.

"Did you ever hear such a fuss, Désirée?" Mrs. Green asked, when the letter was handed back. "And all because I've stayed away four and a half months instead of three! Why, you'd almost think they'd missed me!"

"I should say they have," Désirée answered gently.

Mrs. Green grabbed at the letter again.

"Do you think so, my dear? Why, to live with them you'd say they had no use for 'Ma.'"

She read the letter through again.

"Yes," she said, "I do keep an eye on their socks and things, and see they're all sorted out properly when they come from the laundry. And I always do take care that nobody runs off with the morning paper, in case Mr. Green should come home for lunch and want another look at it. But I've got so used to doing it that I forgot I did."

She sighed.

"I'm having a great time here in Paris. Yet I suppose if they want me at home I must go."

She paused, and her gaze was fixed on her charge.

By now Mrs. Green was certain that Désirée regretted not having accepted Wilson's offer, and she determined to give the girl a chance of rectifying her error.

"Why don't you come back with me, my dear, and have a look at England? Mr. Green and the boys would be so pleased and proud. They're not classy, like the people we know here, but they'd make you right welcome."

"Thank you very much, but I think I shall go back to Nice. I want to get my place there in working order. And then next year you must come and stay with me, and bring Mr. Green and the boys, if they will leave their business," Désirée answered quietly.

"But I don't like leaving you all alone," Mrs. Green protested.

"I shall take Miss Ryder back with me. She can be my companion as well as my governess. Besides, I'm used to being alone," she added.

Loth to part with her charge, Mrs. Green tried further persuasions, but Désirée was firm in her determination to return to her home in the South of France.

She wanted to go with Mrs. Green, but she knew Wilson lived in the same town, and she was too proud to follow after the man who had gone away from her.

CHAPTER III

THE DECEPTION

Soon after her return to England Mrs. Green gave a party. Wilson was among those invited. On receiving her card he had intended to refuse; gayety and himself were very out of tune nowadays. But he had to go, drawn there by the fact that Mrs. Green had only just left Désirée.

He was late in arriving. Once there, he had no wish to dance. He mooned around, avoiding possible partners, hugging his misery to himself. Outwardly he seemed much the same as usual, except that there was a look of settled dreariness at the back of his steady brown eyes.

About his own future he had not yet decided. Since leaving France he had been too busy selling his business, settling his affairs, and investing Désirée's fortune to the best advantage, to give much thought to himself. Now that everything was settled, a hopeless blank confronted him, a future that held neither love nor money, but year after year of hard work, without the buoyancy of first youth to support him, and with no possible princess to whom to look forward.

He had not been long in the house before Mrs. Green saw him.

"I'd given you up," she said by way of greeting.

"I'm late, but I couldn't get away any sooner. How is everybody? And how did you leave Désirée?" he went

on, going straight to his point, but in as casual a tone as he could muster.

"As well as if nothing had ever been the matter with her."

"No doubt she enjoyed herself in Paris."

"She ought to have enjoyed herself. The men simply swarmed after her. She was the rage—the sensation. We went everywhere, to all the best people. But I never saw a girl so stand-offish with men, so particular, so scornful. 'The Ice Maiden' they called her, because she refused to melt to any one of them, and some of them were hot enough in love with her to have thawed a glacier."

"Is she as beautiful as ever?" Wilson asked, a parched note in his voice.

"Why don't you go and see for yourself?"

"I can't spare the time," he answered.

Mrs. Green glanced at him keenly.

All of a sudden it struck her if Wilson had ever proposed. It was not in keeping with his character to let the girl go, merely because she had refused him. He would have renewed his attack. But he always had avoided the matrimonial noose. In the eleventh hour he might have decided he preferred bachelorhood to Désirée, although Mrs. Green could not imagine any man in his senses doing such a thing.

"Can't spare the time indeed!" she said impatiently. "If you really wanted to go you could. I believe you're afraid you might fall in love with her enough to want to get married, and you're deliberately avoiding temptation."

"When the Countess Désirée marries it will be a man of her own set," he replied stiffly.

"There were plenty of her own set after her in Paris, yet she gave them all the go-by."

"She's still a child. It'll take her a year or two to grow up."

"Oh, you and your excuses! When you find a girl you fancy you jib at her as if she were a dose of poison. You're a born bachelor, that's what you are, John Wilson, and I've no patience with you."

With this Mrs. Green sailed off.

For perhaps an hour longer Wilson mooned round her premises, then, feeling too much like a skeleton at the feast, he took himself and his gnawing misery back home.

There he found a letter awaiting him in the round, unformed hand he knew now—the second of the sort he had seen. To the first he had replied briefly, saying he would be pleased to do anything for her, to help or advise her in any way, that his services were always at her disposal; but he had made no mention of visiting France.

Eagerly he opened the letter, wondering what Désirée had to say.

It was sent from the old château in the mountains, and it ran:

"My Dear Friend,—As perhaps you know, Mrs. Green has left Paris for England, and I have come back here to the peace and quiet of the country. I do not think I cared much about Paris. It has such strange values. Mr. Bassino was tolerated, even encouraged, merely because he had money. So I came back here, having decided I prefer trees and flowers and views and Wolf and my two old servants to all the people I met in Paris.

"But I wish I had some one here with me who really knew how to look after the place. There is so much I want to do, but I don't know how to set about it. I want to have this old house that I love made habitable for one thing. I want to start a home for blind babies. And I

want to grow food on my land, because the world is hungry, and I know what that means.

"There is no relative or connection of my own that I care to call upon for help or advice. When I was poor they forgot about me, and now their offers do not ring true. Alone I cannot do any of the things I want to do. I am only really three months old. It is three months to-day since I first saw the light. I feel very young and ignorant, and the world is a large and strange place.

"I would like to have an Englishman here, as steward on my estate, because I have learned to trust your nation. He need not necessarily be a farmer, but a man who knows how to deal with the world and men and money—things I have not learned to do, that I sometimes feel I never shall learn, having so many years of darkness and ignorance behind me.

"Please send me some reliable man out from England, who could live in the house here and be always at hand for me to consult, and to advise me—someone you can trust and recommend.

"Always yours most gratefully,

"DÉSIRÉE DE MAILLY.

"P. S.—Miss Ryder, my governess and companion, says that in a case like this a salary must be mentioned. You will perhaps know what to offer. Would £1,000 a year be enough?—D. DE M."

As Wilson read the letter through, he read between the lines. Désirée was grown up, yet really only a child, alone for the first time since riches and sight had come into her life, unable to cope with her new world, and afraid of it.

Then his future was no longer blank. Life suddenly had an object. He would answer the call in person.

The girl had never seen him. He would go himself, pretending he was sending his cousin. He would be her servant and steward. Then at least he could serve her—

his fairy princess—although his poverty and her position now placed them as far asunder as the poles.

There and then he sat down and wrote a letter to Désirée.

He regretted he was too busy to come himself, he said, but he was sending his cousin, Edward Wilson, a most reliable man, one she could depend on in every way. Three hundred pounds a year would be an ample salary. She could expect her new steward in about a week's time. He would let her know the exact day and train later on.

CHAPTER IV

EDWARD WILSON

About a week later Wilson was driving in a hired carriage along the narrow road leading to the old château. The Judas trees no longer dripped purple tears on the white dust. The tears had gone, and in their place were smooth, glossy leaves. The vineyards now were not just an array of knobbly stumps, with here and there a touch of green on their tops. They had sprouted and spread, stretching long green arms along wood and wire supports, and the bees buzzed among them, seeking honey in the masses of tiny flowers. The cherries no longer held white arms towards an azure sky; their branches drooped slightly, heavy with red fruit. And the loquats stood yellow-ripe against the deep green of their great shiny leaves.

As Wilson drove along he was realizing that one deception invariably begets another. For one thing, he had had to make arrangements for any letters that Désirée chanced to send to him to be forwarded under cover to his new address, and he would have to reply to hers in the same roundabout way. Also, it had dawned on him that by hook or by crook he must have an interview with Pierre and Juliette before seeing the girl, for the two old servants had not been blind.

To attain this end he left Paris by an earlier train than the one he had mentioned in his letter to Désirée. He decided to break his journey at Marseilles, and go on

by a local train, one that arrived in Nice about an hour before the one he was due to come by. If he arrived at the château unexpectedly, he would have a much better chance of seeing the servants before he saw their mistress.

Provided he could see either of the old retainers alone, he felt there would be no difficulty in making them fall in with his plans.

Wilson's French had made amazing strides since his first visit to the château. During the last few dreary months he had tried to find a brief forgetfulness in learning the language, an occupation that proved a form of torture, since it had seemed then that there would be no chance of ever conversing with Désirée in her own tongue.

Luck was with Wilson. At the broken iron gates leading into the Domaine de Mailly his carriage overtook Juliette—a different Juliette from the shuffling old creature of his first visit. Her mouth was no longer toothless, her clothes no longer green with age, and washed and patched until there was hardly any of the original garment left. She wore a neat black dress and a large white apron, with a black mushroom hat on her head, tied under her chin with ribbon.

On seeing the occupant of the carriage she threw up her hands.

"It's the English monsieur himself!" she cried.

At once Wilson was out of the carriage and laying his campaign of deceit before her.

"But why all this pretending and pretence?" she asked. "The Comtesse will be more pleased to see you than your cousin."

"I don't want the Countess to know it's me," he re-

plied, a painful flush deepening the red of his plain, strong face.

Juliette cast a sharp glance at him.

"Well, then, you are Monsieur Wilson's cousin, if it pleases you better."

She told him Désirée had gone with her governess into the distant town to meet the train. Then she drove with him to the château, showed him his room, and, leaving him to wash and tidy himself, went off to let Pierre into the secret.

As Wilson washed off the dirt and grime of the journey, it seemed incredible that he was back in the ruined castle. Already the air of dire poverty had left the place, although but little had been done as yet towards its repair.

The room was the one in which he had slept on the night Désirée had given him shelter. The window had been mended, the decayed furniture removed. There was now a modern bed, a new suite of furniture, and rugs on the tiled floor.

Downstairs, too, he had noticed improvements. Although the plaster was still off the walls of the great hall, there had been an attempt at furnishing the place. In it he had seen a set of the colored plaited wicker furniture so common in France—a settee, a couple of armchairs, four small ones, and a table to match, looking lost and forlorn in the great expanse of the floor.

After washing and unpacking some of his things Wilson went downstairs again. In the hall a smart maid awaited him. He was taken into the dining-room. On one corner of the long table a slight repast was laid—a plate of sandwiches, a dish of fruit, and a bottle of Burgundy. It was not spread on a colored cloth, but on one

of the finest linen, and the china and glass were of the best quality; otherwise the old dining-room was as he first knew it, except that there were rugs on the floor, curtains in the windows, and the kitchen chairs had been replaced by rush-seated ones.

As Wilson ate sandwiches with the healthy appetite of a strong man he glanced round the room and smiled tenderly. She had not yet learned how to grapple with £10,000 odd a year, this little girl who once had had only sixty pounds.

Although all the improvements had been made with good taste, none of them was in proportion to her income.

Wilson knew exactly how the beamed old dining-room ought to be furnished—as a mediæval refectory. And so it should be, now he was at hand to help and advise the child. And that vast hall in front of the house wanted great heavy pieces of furniture, old armor, books, and deep divans—divans that could be drawn up round the wide open fireplace in the winter when a freezing wind was blowing down from the snow-clad heights behind. The hall must be made into a combined smoking-room, library, and lounge that would give an air of comfort and homelikeness the moment one entered the house. Those bits of wicker furniture could go into some morning room, cool and whitewashed, with rush mats and light curtains, for hot summer use.

When his hunger was appeased he sat on, planning to himself how the mansion could best be modernized, whilst still retaining its old features, when the sound of wheels coming up the drive sent his mind to other matters, and made his throat swell with a choking, excited sensation.

He knew who would be coming—Désirée, whose eyes

would rest on him for the first time full of sight. But, thank God! she would be thinking him his cousin.

He heard the carriage halt. A few moments later there was the sound of light little feet entering the hall beyond. Then a soft voice said with consternation and distress:

"Oh, Juliette, Mr. Wilson's cousin was not at the station. What can have happened to him? Can I possibly have missed him? But Miss Ryder accosted every lone and lost-looking Englishman there."

"He's here, my jewel. He came by an earlier train."

"Here! Oh, where?"

"In the dining-room."

There was a quick little movement in the direction of the half-open door. Conscious of a queer numb feeling, Wilson got to his feet.

A girl appeared on the threshold, dressed in white from head to foot, with a wide, drooping hat, a long lace veil, a string of ivory beads about her throat, and ivory bracelets on her slim bare arms—Désirée, ten times more desirable, fulfilling all the promise of the wraith-like, neglected child he had found.

Her face was no longer thin, but delicately rounded and faintly pink with health; her lips were no longer pale, but coral red; her eyes no longer vague and misty, but limpid pools of soft dark blue. She did not droop now; she carried herself proudly, looking taller than she really was. It seemed to Wilson that she towered above him; a princess truly, cold, dainty, and imperious.

Although her face was more mature, it had lost none of its innocence. Wistfulness still lurked in the curves of the proud little mouth, and in the soft blue eyes was a thoughtful, searching look.

Wilson stood dazed by the vision of grace and beauty

confronting him, knowing exactly how much he had lost by doing the "right thing."

He had tried to deal as honestly by the girl he loved as he had dealt with the rest of the world. And now——

The dream he had dreamt the night he had slept at the château had come true, with some slight variations. She *was* on a throne high above him, too high for him to reach. But he was doing the weeping—silent, unseen tears that agony wrung from his heart, because Fate had decreed he could not have the one woman he wanted.

Désirée glanced at him quickly. There was neither surprise nor disappointment nor contempt in her glance, as Wilson feared there might be. There was only the critical, searching look that fell to the lot of all strangers now.

Then she came towards him with outstretched hand.

"I'm so sorry I missed you. Why didn't you wire and say you were coming by an earlier train?"

Like a man stunned Wilson took her hand into his.

"I should have done so, Countess," he lied, "had I known you were coming to the station to meet me."

At his voice Désirée started, and a quiver ran through the hand she was just drawing from his relaxing grip.

She gave one quick, startled look at him, and then her eyes dropped.

The princess, gracious and imperious, a trifle condescending, perhaps, vanished. In her place came the Désirée Wilson knew—a young girl, confused and blushing, with downcast eyes, yet smiling at him shyly in welcome.

It was very easy for Wilson to come pretending to be his cousin. Because Désirée had never seen him, it did not follow that she would not recognize him. He reckoned

without the years of blindness that lay behind her—years that had taught her to recognize people by voice and touch and step.

Désirée knew her champion was there—the man who had come into her night and saved her. His was the same kind, firm, pleasant voice, the same strong, careful grip on her hand. His hands, brown and powerful, had led her from darkness into light, had lifted her from poverty to splendor, had kept dishonor and a loathsome marriage at bay.

Paris had taught the girl the value of her own rank and wealth and beauty. She wanted them all now, not for herself, but to lay at the feet of her hero.

Unable to meet his gaze, she stood wondering why he had come back calling her "Countess" instead of "Désirée," bringing with him the feeling of an immeasurable gulf between them, they who had once been so close that their lips had touched. Why he had come back pretending to be his cousin?

She wanted nothing but to fall on her knees before him, to kiss the hands that had rescued her from darkness, misery, and disgrace, to put them on her head, on her heart, as a sign that she was his abject slave.

But modesty forbade any such performance.

"I hope you will like my house," a soft, confused voice said. "And I hope you'll be quite comfortable here. Please do ask for anything you want. I shall be only too glad to get it, because of all—your cousin did for me."

There was only one thing Wilson wanted—the Countess de Mailly—and that he dared not ask for.

"I like your house immensely, and the whole surround-

ings. The only thing I want at present is to get to work on it all as soon as possible," he said.

To compose herself, Désirée turned from him and went to one of the long windows to let in Wolf, who was scratching frantically at the glass panels.

As Wilson watched her go, again he cursed that fatal necklace.

But for it he would be a rich man still, standing on a pile of gold that raised him to something approaching her level, not what he was now—her paid servant.

If only there had been no railway strike! If only the Gilberts had turned up in time to have got that accursed necklace! Then——

Bassino would have come along to claim his bride. Considering how Désirée loathed the man, it would not have been difficult to have persuaded her to elope with him, Wilson.

They would have married, for, liking him and knowing nothing of what marriage meant, she would have fallen in with his suggestion readily. He could have taken her to some quiet, scented, out-of-the-way spot—a new world that had nothing in it that she knew save him; where utter helplessness would have made her cling to him still closer.

There would have been happy days for the girl, safe in the knowledge that he stood between her and a marriage she loathed, relatives she disliked, poverty and neglect; blissful days for him with the helpless little girl he worshiped to cherish and comfort and look after; days of strength and self-control, whilst he turned a blind child's trust and liking into love, a white passion to match his own.

And one evening, when he came to her bedside to kiss

her good-night, she would put her weak arms about his neck, refusing to let him go, pressing against him with innocent desire. Afterwards day and night they would be together, and no world could be dark where such love was.

Then one day, perhaps, when she was sitting on his knee, hugging one of his hands to her breast, or perhaps one morning early, when she leaned across him, tickling his face with the end of one of her long plaits, with the idea of teasing him into full wakefulness, little knowing he was wide awake and watching her, rejoicing that she had found happiness within his arms, it would have occurred to him to wonder why she could not see, if her eyes had ever been examined. He would have taken her to a specialist. Then, if light meant disillusion, a commonplace man instead of a hero, at least he would be her husband; she could not have got away from that fact, he thought, with a touch of savagery. And she would be his now, this lovely girl; his by the right of vows exchanged and nights spent in his arms.

Into the whirl of regrets and imaginings in which Wilson was moving Désirée's voice came again.

"You must be tired after your long journey. I do hope Juliette looked after you properly."

Wilson came back to earth again. Désirée had *not* eloped with him. He had been fool enough to touch that accursed "Necklace of Tears." He had done the right thing by her all along the line, and his reward was a crop of bitterness, not a harvest of love.

"Juliette has looked after me very well indeed," he said, surprised to find his tone of voice quite normal. "She has seen after all my creature comforts, even to

feeding me," he finished, glancing at the diminished heap of sandwiches on the table.

"I'm so glad," Désirée said shyly, still avoiding his gaze. "I—I shouldn't like to think of you being neglected in any way."

"It's you who are being neglected, Countess, not me. I'm sure you must need something, after your long, hot, dusty drive down to Nice and back."

For a moment soft blue eyes met steady brown ones.

Yes, this must be the same man—John Wilson, not Edward. There was no mistake. There could not be two men so kind and thoughtful, with the same firm, pleasant voices, the same strong, careful hands.

But why had he come back as a servant to his slave, this man she would call "master"?

CHAPTER V

THE SECRET

In the kitchen Juliette stood, her nose deep in some pot in which a dish was being prepared for luncheon. The château now boasted a cook as well as a housemaid, but, having done all the cooking for years, Juliette trusted no one but herself. At that moment the cook was outside shelling peas, and the housemaid was busy in some other quarter of the dilapidated mansion.

The kitchen was more like a long brick passage than anything else, with a wide stone slab running all down one side, and a shelf above, where copper pots and pans gleamed. Pairs of bricks stood at intervals down the slab. Between each pair a few sticks smouldered, and on them pans simmered and boiled.

In days of poverty Juliette had always cooked in this fashion. She had produced excellent dishes by this method, and her lips had set in a straight, hard line when her mistress had mentioned getting a proper kitchen range. But the new cook had agreed with her mistress. She had never been called upon to cook in this gipsy fashion, and the countess must quite understand that the most perfect gems of her art could not be produced unless she had a proper stove.

The Countess quite understood. She understood also that there was going to be trouble in the kitchen department. Juliette was not going to surrender the reins she

had held for more than twenty-one years either into the hands of a newcomer or into those of her mistress. Désirée did not feel equal to coping with the situation; she was torn between love of the old woman who had served her so faithfully and a desire to have some say in the management of her own house. A kitchen range had been ordered, but where it was going to be put when it came the girl did not know. All these were problems with which her new steward would wrestle.

As Juliette sniffed scornfully at the gently simmering duck, to make sure that the interloper had put in the exact proportion of onions and herbs, an excited voice said all at once:

"Juliette, why didn't you tell me it was *my* Mr. Wilson who had come?"

"*Your* Mr. Wilson. What next, Comtesse? Are you going to lay claim to every man who comes to the house? Paris must have turned your head."

"Don't be silly. Don't try and deceive me. You know as well as I do that he is *my* Mr. Wilson."

"Well, if you say I know, I suppose I must know, and that ends the matter."

"But why has he come pretending to be his cousin?"

"Perhaps because he knows he's not handsome," Juliette suggested shrewdly.

"Not handsome!"

Désirée's voice was a soft shriek of denial.

"Certainly I wouldn't call him good looking," the old woman replied.

She sniffed again at the duck.

"I'm sure that new cook of yours has put too much onion in the stew," she complained.

Désirée ignored this side-issue.

"His face is splendid," she declared, in defence of her hero. "So strong and kind and noble."

"If you think so, all the better for Monsieur Wilson," Juliette put in.

"He has a figure like Hercules," the girl went on. "And his hands! They are hands that can do things, not useless bits of skin and bone like mine."

Désirée threw out her own small hands and gazed at them contemptuously.

"Oh, Juliette, just think what he has done for me," she cried. "And now he's afraid of me."

"It's not you he's afraid of, mademoiselle, but thanks and a fuss," Juliette explained. "The English are always like that. There is nothing that nation hates more."

"He's just what I thought he would be," the girl declared, "great and noble, yet modest and humble."

"Oh, la, la!" Juliette exclaimed. "This Monsieur Wilson has always worn a halo. From the first there was nothing in the house good enough for him."

Désirée laid an imploring hand on the old woman's arm.

"Don't tell him I've guessed who he really is," she pleaded, "or he may run away again."

Juliette cast a teasing, affectionate glance at her mistress.

He was just the man for the Comtesse Désirée, who, despite her years, was still only a child, this steady-going, capable, English monsieur. He would not take advantage of her innocence and ignorance. He would look after the girl, her money and her estate, not squander her heritage. She would be far better married to him than to one of those gay young sparks from Paris, who might end up by breaking her heart and spending her fortune.

"A pretty comedy we're going to have, Comtesse," she remarked. "But still, it's your business, not mine, so why should I say anything?"

She turned again to the stew, as if it were of far greater importance than Désirée's discovery, and once more sniffed at it disapprovingly.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEW STEWARD

Wilson had come back to the Domaine de Mailly determined to do his duty and avoid temptation, but when he found temptation avoiding him he altered his tactics somewhat.

He saw nothing more of Désirée that first day except at lunch and dinner, when she appeared in company with her governess, a staid person of sixty. At both meals the girl had very little to say, leaving all the conversation to him and Miss Ryder, though once or twice he caught her eyes fixed on him—eyes that dropped the moment his own came in her direction.

On the afternoon of the second day he ran her to earth, alone by the old reservoir with the crocodile, an array of lesson-books on the old oil press beside her.

He paused, watching her with eyes that held a stifled, worshiping gleam.

"Do you know, Countess," he said, "that you've omitted to tell me what you want me to do?"

With a startled air she looked up at him. She had no intention of telling him to do anything. A slave does not give orders to a master.

"You—you must do just what you like," she faltered.

"Then I'd like first of all to get this house comfortable for you."

"Of course, if you think so," she answered shyly.

With pencil and note-book Wilson spent the rest of the afternoon in going over and around the old mansion, deciding how the place could be best done up with the least discomfort to the inmates.

At dinner that night he laid his scheme before his employer.

"Of course it shall be done like that, if you like it that way," she said when he had finished.

Then Wilson had to laugh.

"But it's what you like, Countess, not what I like. You're master here, not I."

A faint blush came to Désirée's face, but she made no reply.

The next morning, since there was no sign of temptation, he sought for it diligently, eventually finding it in one of the moldering rooms upstairs, doing lessons with Miss Ryder.

He excused himself for intruding, but when he set out to do a thing he liked to get on with it.

Had he the Countess's permission to go to Nice and get estimates for the renovations from reliable firms of builders?

He had her permission, given in a meek, small voice.

That morning Wilson went to Nice, in a mule cart driven by old Pierre, the only conveyance the château possessed. Désirée had not yet dared to buy many things for herself; the mule cart and a couple of cows Juliette had purchased; both were things the old woman understood, and over which it would have taken a very clever person to swindle her.

Wilson was more than two hours in getting to Nice, a journey a motor could have done in a quarter of the

time, and the idea of the wasted hours irritated him, for he wanted them all to spend in Désirée's service.

The next day after lunch Désirée would have escaped, as she always did, the moment the meal was over, but as he stood, holding the dining-room door open for her and Miss Ryder, he said:

"I think we'd better begin by buying a motor car, There's too much time wasted in jogging up and down to Nice in that mule cart."

"I wouldn't dare to. I should get so 'done,'" she confessed, in confusion the truth slipping out.

Wilson knew this was more than possible, but he had no intention of making the girl more nervous than she already was by letting her see he knew how utterly incapable she was, for that confession betrayed that she had been "done" not once, but several times.

"I can come with you and see that that doesn't happen," he answered. "What sort of a car would you like?"

Only just in time she remembered not to say "one like yours."

"I don't know," she responded, anxious that her champion should have exactly what he liked, since he appeared to have put aside money and luxury in order to come and be her servant.

"How would it suit you if we got old Pierre to drive us to Nice to-morrow morning and had a look at some?" he inquired.

"That would suit me all right," she said.

The matter being arranged, Désirée would have slipped away there and then, but again his voice stopped her.

"When you have time I should like you to show me round the estate, so that I can get some idea how much there really is of it, and what should be done."

"I can come any time," she said submissively.

"Then perhaps we can go now," he answered, delighted with himself at having enticed her out for a walk.

She vanished, to appear in the hall some minutes later with a big drooping hat on her head, and a green parasol to screen and shade her eyes from the sun.

With Wolf at their heels they set out.

As they went down the wide marble steps of the terrace together, Wilson heard that the highroad bounded her property on one side, and that it extended deep into the hills and valleys, in the shape of a gigantic horseshoe.

Désirée took him through the tangled garden, out on the earthy terrace where her carnations grew, down a steep hillside, coming eventually to a narrow way, half lane, half footpath, that meandered up and down, through olive groves and pine woods, past orchards and vineyards, among groups of fig and orange and lemon trees, round palms and cypresses, which he learned was the boundary of her estate.

As they walked together, now in sunshine, now in shade, in a world full of flowers, and sweet with the scent of broom, wild thyme, lavender, and roses, for the nonce Wilson forgot they were mistress and servant. There was such a feeling of fellowship and equality, as if what was lacking in one was balanced by the other.

John Wilson, the lover, would not admit that the princess had any shortcomings. But John Wilson, a wise and sensible man, who had lived through a sudden, wild infatuation to a deep, steady, abiding love, and a clear vision of his ideal, knew the girl lacked stamina, strength, and will-power, and that she tried to make up for these deficiencies with an intense pride, and anyone cruel enough to pull down that barrier would find behind it only

a helpless child, totally unfitted and unable to cope with the world and the people in it.

He had so much stamina, strength, and will-power himself that her lack of these qualities did not trouble him. He worried over what Désirée had that he had not —birth and breeding and money—too humble before his goddess to realize that his lack of these attributes would not trouble her, provided she really loved him.

The estate proved to be more extensive than he had imagined. When they had walked about two miles he called a halt. They sat down on a grassy bank, the dog stretched at their feet.

"Have we much farther to go?" he asked.

"It's about five English miles all the way round," she replied.

As Désirée talked she did not look at Wilson, but at the dog, for Wolf looked at her with the same steady brown eyes as the man, in the same faithful worshiping way.

"Can you walk so far?" he asked, all concern. When he had inveigled her out with him he had had no idea the walk would be so long.

Never at any time in her life had Désirée walked five miles on end, but she was sure she could do it now, for there was a strange feeling of being able to draw strength from her companion.

"I think so," she said. "I'm not at all tired yet."

After a few minutes' rest the walk went on again.

The girl was all eyes for the things around her. The most ordinary of birds and butterflies and flowers were a delight to her, something to which to call Wilson's attention. He always responded heartily, remembering she had only been able to see them for a few months.

Occasionally a crumbling house was reached, in which he learned that in her grandfather's wealthy days the people connected with the estate had lived. Whilst she rested he went over the decaying dwellings, to see if they could be made habitable again.

Wilson was the type of man who could make a success of anything that needed a pair of strong hands, with a masterly brain behind them. He intended to do his best for Désirée, as he always had done; to make her property pay its way, to be a faithful steward. By now he realized she was not going to issue orders, but was leaving the whole thing entirely to him.

"There'll be no tea for you to-day," he remarked, after leaving one of the ruined houses, "unless we happen to drop across some friendly cottage."

Désirée was talking to him freely now. During the walk it seemed as if the gulf had been bridged—that they were quite close together again.

"There's no friendly cottage to drop across," she replied. "The nearest inhabited place is still the château. But there's plenty of fruit. Anything that grows on this side we can have," she finished, waving a hand to the right of them."

In the shade of a trio of somber cypresses they feasted on red cherries and yellow loquats that Wilson had gathered from the abundance around, and for his sake Désirée regretted that another week or two must pass before the peaches and apricots would be ripe enough for eating.

"And after that there will be pears," she said. "Any quantity of them. And then figs by the ton. And grapes, but not many of those. The vineyards have been neg-

lected for so long that they are utterly ruined. And then come oranges and lemons again."

"You ought to sell your fruit," he remarked.

"I've so much money now that I don't want any more. Juliette is bottling some of the fruit and making jam and giving a lot away. But I shouldn't care to sell it, now that I'm so well off."

"But it's far better to sell it than let it go to waste. Every pound of cherries or peaches or figs or oranges that you put on the market automatically makes cherries and peaches and figs and oranges cheaper for the rest of the world. If you want to grow food you must sell it. If there's any one corner of your estate less beautiful than another, it wouldn't be a bad idea to put up a fruit bottling and jam factory. Then all these tons of fruit won't be going to waste. And we'll have people out from Nice to work for us—bring them up every morning and take them back every evening in a motor-lorry—a day in the country they'll be paid for, instead of having to pay for themselves. And the lorry will do to take our produce down in, and to bring back stores.

As Wilson talked, interested in his scheme, with the feeling of "oneness" that being alone with Désirée had brought, he did not say "you" and "your" to his employer, but "we" and "our." This seemed so natural to Désirée that she did not notice it. She looked at him with wondering gaze, marveling at the rapidly developed scheme.

"It sounds very nice, but I couldn't do it," she confessed.

"I don't suppose you could. It's little things like that that I'm here to look after."

"What would you call a big thing?" she asked, in an awed tone of voice.

"Well, to run this estate as it should be run, and to make it support itself and the home for blind babies."

Wilson said it with a sort of relish, as if he enjoyed the task ahead of him. Like many a man, he did not crave so much for a life of leisure and amusement as for congenial occupation. He wanted work, but work that he really liked and that interested him, and in managing Désirée's estate he had it.

And she admired her companion all the more.

He was a man who could tackle big things, and look as if he enjoyed the prospect, instead of being scared out of his life at the mere idea, as she would be. She could not even tackle her own household. There was a strike on there now.

Both Juliette and the cook had refused to have anything to do with the English breakfast which she had ordered for her hero, a breakfast of porridge and bacon and eggs, such as she had gathered from Mrs. Green all English people had.

Eggs, yes; both the cook and Juliette could understand a man having a boiled egg with his first *dêjeuner*. But whoever heard of a civilized person eating pudding and meat at eight o'clock in the morning?

"If this English monsieur is to have pudding and meat with his breakfast, then mademoiselle will have to cook them herself," the cook had declared.

And Juliette had seconded this motion, for once siding with her rival. If things went on like this the Comtesse would be expecting them to cook a dinner with seven or eight courses at eight o'clock in the morning! Any idea of the sort must be nipped in the bud.

Wilson breakfasted in the dining-room, in solitary state, in an English manner, on porridge and bacon and eggs. But he little knew who had cooked it. Désirée, with painful effort and burnt fingers, determined that her hero should be fed after the manner of his nation. She did for him what she would not have dared to do for herself. She braved a couple of irate and refractory women who stood in the kitchen whilst she cooked his breakfast, sneering at her attempts, criticizing her methods.

However, she said nothing of this to Wilson. A man so capable would think her a poor creature since she could not exact obedience from her own menials.

She put the matter completely out of her mind, refusing to let the painful morning scene mar the happiness of the moment.

There was a brief silence during which cherries and loquats were demolished.

All at once Désirée cast a quick glance at her companion. Then she averted her face so that he should not see the soft little smile that came to her lips, in spite of all efforts—the smile of a girl about to tease her lover.

"Mr. Wilson, is your cousin anything like you?" a demure voice asked presently, with an undercurrent of mischief in it.

The question made Wilson wriggle uncomfortably, suddenly brought face to face with his own deception and the unflattering image of himself he always conjured up when thinking of himself in connection with Désirée.

"He's a very ordinary sort," he answered, in as casual a tone as he could command at the moment.

Then his gaze went to the girl beside him, with her small hands full of red cherries, the big hat shading her perfect face.

"What do you imagine him to be like?" he asked, wanting to find out what her idea of him really was.

"He's not very tall," she answered gravely; "about as tall as you, I should say. And he's awfully good-looking; his face is so strong and firm and kind. He has a figure like Hercules, and such nice hands—the hands of a man who can do things. And I know there's not a greater or more noble man on this earth than *my* Mr. Wilson," she finished earnestly.

Inwardly Wilson groaned.

It was as he had always suspected and feared. In her mind she had some glorified, impossible hero masquerading as himself. More than ever was he glad he had come back as his cousin.

CHAPTER VII

THE RENOVATED CHÂTEAU

The next morning Wilson was up rather earlier than usual. There were one or two matters he wanted to go into before he took Désirée to Nice in quest of a car. By now he knew every inch of the old château, and, as a short cut to his bedroom to wash his hands prior to breakfast, he passed in by the back premises.

The door of the passage-like kitchen stood slightly ajar, and from it issued the smell and sound of frizzling bacon. Kitchen accommodation was one of the many problems with which Wilson had to deal; the present one was wholly inadequate for the mansion as it would be after the contemplated changes were made. A new wing would have to be built on, with a kitchen and a servants' hall, and, above, the most up-to-date of bathrooms and extra bedrooms.

All this he was thinking as he entered the house. Then through the half-open door he saw something that took his mind to other matters, and which had for him the fascination and drawing powers of a magnet for a needle.

Between two of the pairs of bricks Désirée stood, with a ridiculously small frilled apron tied about her waist, a knife in one hand, a frown on her brow, her attention divided between simmering porridge and a pan in which rashers of bacon were frying. Close by Juliette and the cook stood, flushed and rebellious looking, both with

tightly pursed lips, one watching the coffee and the other making the toast.

"Are you having a cooking lesson, Countess?" Wilson asked in English.

His voice made the knife drop from her hand to the stone floor with a sharp clatter.

"No, I'm showing Juliette and cook how to do eggs and bacon and make porridge in the English manner," she answered bravely, terrified lest he should find out her incompetence and despise her.

Wilson felt like asking from what source she had got her own knowledge, but he desisted. Also it seemed to him the women were not taking much notice of their instructress; they had had their backs half turned towards her, and had been ignoring her completely until his voice had startled them into attention.

He glanced from the strained little face before him to the grim set faces of the two women, and smiled slightly.

Being a healthy man, he enjoyed his meals, but he never gave a thought as to who had prepared them. Now it dawned on him that the three breakfasts he had had at the château had been cooked by Désirée. He wished he had known this fact sooner, so that he could have appreciated them more. For all that, he hated to see the child in unlovely surroundings, or worried over domestic matters. It seemed to him that all the joy and beauty and happiness in the world could not recompense her for the dark, miserable years she had lived through. And it had very quickly dawned on him that there was trouble between mistress and maids.

"Well, Juliette and cook must be very slow in learning, if you still have to show them how to cook an English breakfast," he remarked in broken French.

His comment had the effect he intended. It made the two women bridle at this slur on their intelligence. Moreover, there was a note in his voice that said he was going to have no nonsense—that they had now to deal with a man who intended to be master, not a nervous and easily bullied mistress.

"Mademoiselle la Comtesse won't trust me, monsieur," the cook said haughtily, "although I can fry eggs and bacon far better than Juliette."

"Indeed you can't," Juliette cried, snatching a knife and elbowing Désirée aside. "In days gone by I have often fried eggs and bacon and made a pudding of oats. They were favorite luncheon dishes with the old Count de Mailly. Run along, *ma petite,*" she finished, turning, all smiles, to Désirée. "Old Juliette will do this for you every morning since you can't trust your new cook."

"Can't trust me, indeed!" the cook flared. "It's you that's forever poking your nose into things I'm cooking, taking off lids and spoiling the flavor, prying and interfering."

"I should think I don't trust you and your new-fangled ways and your kitchen stoves," Juliette shrieked. "I've cooked like this for forty years, and if it's good enough for me, it's good enough for you."

Helplessly Désirée glanced at Wilson. It had come at last, what she had been daily expecting and dreading—a battle royal between her old servant and the new one.

"No, Juliette, it's not good enough for you," Wilson's voice broke in firmly and quietly, speaking rather slowly in broken French. "You don't suppose that, after all your years of faithful service, your mistress would be content to let you stay here still working? With your knowledge of poultry and cows, of butter and cheese-making, you're

to have charge of a model dairy the Countess is going to have built, with three dairy maids under you."

(This was the first time Désirée had heard of the dairy.)

"And me, monsieur, shall I be expected to stay here and cook on bricks and sticks like a vagabond?" the cook asked. "I would have you know that I've cooked for ladies with higher titles and bigger incomes than Mademoiselle la Comtesse."

"Your mistress is going to have an up-to-date kitchen built, with a proper kitchen range, and you are to have a couple of kitchen maids. But we must all have patience. These things can't be done in five minutes.

The two women quieted down, looking at each other now, not as rivals, but as heads of departments.

Wilson left the kitchen. With fluttering heart and trembling hands Désirée followed him, fearing he had found out her utter incapability.

"If there's any trouble in the kitchen department again, Countess, tell me at once," he remarked, when they were out of earshot of the place. "I'm more used to dealing with people than you are. And there's almost bound to be trouble when a servant has been supreme in a house as long as Juliette has."

"Oh, don't scold her," the girl said quickly, all fears now for the old woman she loved.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he answered. "That's why I gave her a job outside of the house that'll keep her mind employed, and not mean much work."

Désirée loved and admired her champion more than ever.

"I never knew anyone so clever as you," she said. "You sorted them out beautifully."

He was even more clever than she imagined, for he gave no hint that he was aware how incapable she was.

Juliette's remark about "luncheon dishes" had given Wilson the clue to the girl's presence in the kitchen.

"And don't you bother about introducing new customs for me," he said. "Why can't I have just coffee and rolls on the terrace, under the loquat tree, as I had—as I hear you have sometimes," he finished in the same breath.

Every minute of the day Désirée wanted to be with him. She welcomed the idea of a *tête-à-tête* breakfast on the terrace, but she wanted him to have the things to which he was accustomed and which he liked.

"I'd like you to have exactly what you'd have if you were at home," she said.

"If I were at home I should have coffee and boiled eggs and fruit for my breakfast, and if it were fine enough I should eat it in the garden," he said untruthfully.

That same morning Wilson had breakfast on the terrace with Désirée. The scent of flowers and dew came up from the tangled garden, where bees buzzed drowsily, as they had done four months before when she had given him shelter in the ruined castle. His employer had not much to say. She was thinking of all that had happened since then, and what her fate would have been if he had not come into her life.

When the meal was finished he said:

"As soon as you're ready, Countess, we'll set out on the track of a car."

She went up to her room, wishing he would call her Désirée, and she wanted above all things to call him John. It was the nicest name a man could have, and it sounded just like him—firm and kind and strong and good.

This time Wilson did not find the drive down to Nice at all long. Désirée was beside him, her soft voice talking, her small hands pointing to this and that wondrous view. And he could only watch her, rejoicing in her sight as much as she herself did.

He knew Nice well now, that white town by a blue sea, set in the midst of green trees, within a semi-circle of gray mountains that the sun turned into mounds of gold; where the fairy tale had been played out, leaving him the loser. But he did not let his mind dwell on his loss. He had work before him now—to serve the princess faithfully.

After lunch they went to one of the principal motor agencies in the town. Once in the showroom, Wilson did not trouble Désirée about the matter. He looked at the various cars, examining their intricate parts, knowing exactly what type and style would be best suited to her purpose.

Désirée watched him, saying nothing. She loved to see him dealing with men and things in his calm, capable manner, as he had dealt with her and the terrors and darkness in which he had found her.

Above all things, she wanted to put her hands on his arm and squeeze it—squeeze hard and deep into the swelling muscles beneath. The world had become so safe and delightful now he had come back, with his strength and kind, unruffled ways.

A car was finally decided on. There was a trial run. On their return Wilson said:

"Now, Countess, all you have to do is to make out a check."

"That's about all I'm capable of doing," she confessed.

He smiled down at her. Désirée no longer towered

above him. She had got back to her right height, three inches less than he was.

"It's a very useful accomplishment," he replied.

They drove back in state, leaving Pierre to bring up the mule cart.

When the château was reached, Désirée did not immediately leave her steward. She hovered round, watching him garage the car in the old stables. He went about the task with the air of a man who loves the car he is driving, steering it carefully, so as to get no chip or flaw on its newness.

"Do you like the car?" she asked, when it was safely stalled and he came to her side.

Wilson loved a really good motor, and there was a note in the girl's voice as if she considered the new purchase much more his than hers. It took him all his time to keep his finger off that delicately rounded cheek and from asking teasingly:

"Do *you* like it, Désirée?"

But he remembered they were mistress and servant now, she with £10,000 a year and a title, he, a man who had come up from the gutter, with only £300 a year, and that of her giving.

"Yes, I like it," he said soberly, "and a car is a necessity when you live so far away from civilization."

"Don't you like the country?" she asked, a touch of alarm in her voice.

"Personally I prefer the wilds," he answered. "But to run a place like this properly you must have something to get you in touch with the world quickly. And this car will do it in about half an hour, if we ignore the speed limit."

Wilson preferred the country more and more as the days went on.

Before a fortnight had passed he had men digging up the weed-grown terraces on the hillsides, and bricklayers and carpenters at work on the house. Twice a week he went down to Nice, to a college of agriculture, to learn how things were grown in that part of France, so that he could serve his princess better; to see plans connected with her house, and the home for blind babies that was to be built in the sweetest corner of her wilderness of an estate, and the factory for which he had found a spot where it would not prove an eyesore.

When the various contracts were drawn up he would bring them to his employer.

"Well, Countess, this is a fair price for things nowadays," he would say, "so if it's agreeable to you we'll close with this offer."

"If you say it's all right, of course it must be," she would reply, in the old trustful way that always thrilled him.

And she always wondered why he was content to be her servant when he could be her master, and how much longer the farce would have to be kept up. She had written one letter to John Wilson in England, saying how pleased and delighted she was with his cousin. In every way a girl could, she encouraged him, waiting for the days when, in his arms, she could tell him she had always known he was John Wilson, not Edward.

With his fountain pen she would put "Désirée de Mailly" at the foot of bewildering columns of figures and confusing sentences, and leave the rest to him.

Wilson rejoiced that he was there to come between her and all sordid matters. Best above all he loved to

watch her wandering about in her own grounds, seeing sights and beauties that for twenty-one years had been denied her. During his months in England he had often wondered into what she would develop when she had sight and money—the unformed, ignorant child who had made love and passion flame up in him for the first time. And now he knew her for what she was—a quiet, thoughtful, home-loving girl, anxious to do good and be good to all around her, as beautiful in character as in face, a gem among women.

Often when he was up on the old tower of the château superintending the renovations, he would espy a little patch of white somewhere in the green below—Désirée standing entranced with the beauty of the world in which she lived. Every corner of the Domaine de Mailly gave some glorious view of sea or mountain, deep valley and rounded hills. Eve let loose in the Garden of Eden could not have been more interested in the things of her Maker's creating than the girl who wandered so happily in the grounds of her own home.

Occasionally, when he was in the midst of instructing an army of workmen, a soft, excited voice would say:

"Oh, Mr. Wilson, do come and see what I've found."

No matter how busy he might be, that request was a command.

He would be taken to some spot in the spreading grounds and shown, perhaps, half a dozen tree frogs crouched asleep on a bough, one after the other, like the train of ivory elephants one sees carved on a tusk, little bright green things with gilded eyes, looking as if made of india rubber, that Désirée would touch, making one golden eye open lazily and close again, as if the owner were aware no harm would come to it from the hand

that caressed it so gently. Or the call might be merely to see a gray lizard, or a grasshopper about three inches long, or a tiny black scorpion, or a huge bronze beetle, or a woodpecker at work on a tree, or a train of brown ants marching along a path, two abreast, for all the world like a minute, endless army, or an array of brown and green frogs disporting themselves in one of the old irrigation tanks—pretty little fellows, full of droll antics, who acted as if their one aim in life were to amuse the girl who had been so long in darkness; frogs that filled each of the warm nights with their croaking.

When the excited little voice reached Wilson, it needed great self-control on his part not to say:

"Well, Eve, what is it now?"

But wonderful as were all the flowers and trees, the birds, beasts, and fishes to Désirée, there was nothing in the vast scheme of nature to compare with the man who had come into her darkness, bringing light.

When the sun set over the mountains, turning their hard grayness into velvet softness, painting the sky with orange and rose and amber and vivid green, making the old tanks into glittering jewels, the distant sea a fallen rainbow, it was wonderful, something to clasp hands in ecstasy over, to look at with marveling eyes. But it was not so wonderful as "*my* Mr. Wilson."

When night rose like a mist from the landscape, swallowing up first the sea, then the valleys, making the mountains but deep shadows against an indigo sky where silver stars flashed—stars that seemed to have showered down to earth in the fireflies that swarmed in the garden and danced about the trees like tiny silver lamps—it was marvelous, a scene to watch with rapt eyes. But it was not so marvelous as "*my* Mr. Wilson."

In the dim gold of evening, when the angelus sounded softly from a distant village, sending the workmen to their homes, bringing dinner out on the château terrace—the one hour of the day when the gnarled old olives lost their gray look and took on a tender green against the blue-gray of the sky—when the first of the frogs started croaking in the ponds and tanks around, and bats flew like little ghosts in the gloaming, the peace and beauty of it all almost made one weep. But tears of gratitude more often sparkled in Désirée's eyes. But for "*my* Mr. Wilson" she would never have seen night settle so softly upon the earth.

It was delightful, too, to wander with him after dinner in the garden in the moonlight, when the world was a place of ebony and silver, and the mountains loomed like nightrack on the horizon—to go from one to the other of the old irrigation tanks, to strike their stone walls with a stick and silence all the croakers.

But droll and delightful as those frogs were, afraid of *her,* Désirée, who would rather have died than intentionally injure one of them, they were not so droll and delightful as "*my* Mr. Wilson."

"*My* Mr. Wilson is so amusing," Désirée said to him one night as they strolled in the moonlight with Wolf as a chaperon.

Wilson wondered what had given her this impression. He knew he had made one or two idiotic remarks with the idea of chasing the tragedy for a moment from that wan little face, but he could not remember more than that.

Désirée had not looked upon him as amusing in those first days of their acquaintance. He had been a god, a hero, neither of them the beings one expects to pose as

wags. He was still both of these to her, but a man into the bargain—an intensely lovable, delightfully stupid man, who imagined she would not recognize him merely because he had come back to her as his cousin.

His presence sent her singing through the old house which, when he had first come there, had had nothing but drafty sighs and the splash of rain, like tears.

Very often, when her lessons were over, she would come straight out and look at him, as in white overalls he superintended the renovations.

For a time, on the pretext of seeing how things were getting on, she would watch him as he gave a hand here, advice there, instructions about this, that, and the other thing, at everybody's beck and call, yet never out of temper, never flurried, supremely master of himself and those around him.

"You work too hard," she would often say. "For a change come and help me to gather fruit for lunch and dinner."

It was an invitation he could never refuse, to wander in the fruit-laden orchards with the princess, to stand with her under peach and apricot trees, whilst she looked critically at the crop.

"That one is going to be for you now," she would say, pointing at a particularly fine specimen.

And it would be eaten there and then, in company with several others of its kind, sitting with Désirée under the shade of a pine, or olive, or walnut tree. There was no sign of "The Ice Maiden" then, only a young girl, teasing and tender.

"I had cherries in my hat the first day I met *my* Mr. Wilson," she remarked one morning when they were feasting on the last of this crop.

Wilson knew this quite well, and the comment made him fidgety.

He heard a great deal about "*my* Mr. Wilson" during his stay at the château, and he hated him with a deep and ferocious hatred. There was no one on earth so handsome, so clever, so noble. He was a pack of aggressive virtues, bristling with every good point imaginable. He loathed the glorified image of himself that lived in the girl's mind. It never dawned on him to think that Désirée was favoring him, encouraging him even; he never dreamed she had seen through his deception, for one or two letters of hers had already reached him under cover from England, thanking him for sending her such an excellent and reliable steward, saying how much she liked his cousin, and what a nice man he was; he only saw himself privileged because of that impossible person —"*my* Mr. Wilson."

CHAPTER VIII

MR. GREEN PREDICTS

One day Mr. Green came home to lunch with an air about him that his wife knew—an air that portended news.

"What is it?" she asked, the moment he was seated at the table.

"Annie, what has John Wilson been on with in France?" he asked mysteriously.

"Nothing that I know of, though I did once think he was sufficiently in love to marry."

"You and your matchmaking," her husband exclaimed impatiently. "What I want to know is, was he speculating over there?"

"Now, Mr. Green, if he had been, would he be likely to tell me? What questions you men do ask, to be sure."

Mr. Green helped himself liberally to salmon mayonnaise.

"Well, I've just heard that Wilson has sold his business for something like £200,000."

"I'm sure it's worth it," she replied, by no means impressed with the news.

"Not only has he sold his business," Mr. Green went on heavily, "but he has gone and got himself a job abroad."

"All men aren't like you," she answered, glad of an opportunity of getting a thrust home. "Wilson wants to know what the world's made of, and I don't blame him."

Her husband ignored this remark.

"Now I ask you, what does it mean?" he continued impressively. "What does it mean when a man sells his business and goes and takes some tuppence ha'penny job abroad?"

"I never was any good at riddles," she replied placidly.

"It means, Annie, that he's ruined," Mr. Green said, dropping his bomb.

With fork half way to her mouth his wife stared at him, her eyes round with horror.

"Not John Wilson!" she exclaimed. "He's such a good sort."

"John Wilson it is," her husband answered calmly. "And what I want to know is, how did he come a cropper? He must have got himself into some devil of a mess in France. I heard on good authority that he had been negotiating for the sale of his business since the moment he returned. Men don't sell a business like his and skip off abroad unless things have gone mightily wrong with them. If you ask me, he's been dabbling in foreign stocks and shares that he doesn't understand. Or else——"

He paused, inspiration on his face.

"I say, Annie, did he go much to Monte Carlo?" He slapped his leg.

"That's it, I bet you anything," he continued, not waiting for any reply. "Wilson has been to the tables and burned himself badly, like many a man before him. I shouldn't have thought it of him. He's such a level-headed sort. But then you never know. One thing is certain, he's down among the dead men now. And this, Annie, comes of folks going abroad. There's Wilson ruined, and you with your best bracelet stolen, all through trespassing about in foreign lands. England is good enough for me."

Mrs. Green hardly heard the caustic comments on her love of change and travel. She saw a mystery solved—one that had often puzzled her.

"So that was why Wilson didn't propose to the Countess de Mailly," she said. "Anyone with half an eye could see he was madly in love with her."

A tear trickled down her face.

CHAPTER IX

A FLY IN THE OINTMENT

During the first fortnight of his stay at the Domaine de Mailly it seemed to Wilson that he had gained a lesser paradise.

Then a fly appeared in his ointment—not one alone, but a swarm.

The old families around learned that the Countess de Mailly was back, living quietly on her estate—the young heiress whose beauty and romantic story had taken Paris by storm.

People who for years had ignored her existence began to call. They came in motors from thirty miles and more away, in carriages and pairs from Nice. Hardly a day passed without bringing its visitor, and every caller had a coat of arms on carriage or car.

If by chance Wilson appeared during their visit, lorgnettes and monocles would be turned on him, as if he were some strange beast—more especially if he appeared in overalls, as he had done on more than one occasion, when coming in to consult Désirée on some point connected with the renovations, unaware that she had visitors.

One afternoon when this happened, blissfully ignorant that there was anything the matter with her man, she had introduced him to a princess—a real one, not of the fairy species, with long ears, a pronounced moustache, and a pendulous nose; a haughty and impecunious dame, who

had brought her son, a weedy, degenerate princeling. From the moment of Désirée's entrance the prince had not taken his eyes off her. With open admiration he ogled her, as if he could not credit that so much youth, beauty, and money—thrice blessed trinity—could go together. The Countess de Mailly in no way resembled the previous moneyed specimens his mother had produced for his inspection.

"My steward, Mr. Wilson," Désirée had said, smiling at the broad figure in overalls as she had not deigned to smile at the prince.

Wilson had withdrawn as soon as he was able, seeing hostility in the woman's stare, patronage in the man's offhand greeting.

"Am I to understand that that—er—gentleman lives here in the château, Countess?" the princess had asked in an incredulous tone the moment Wilson had vanished.

Désirée smiled softly to herself.

"I like to have Mr. Wilson where I can lay a finger on him at any moment," she replied. "It makes me feel so safe."

"My dear child, have you never heard of the conventions?" the princess exclaimed, horrified.

"Miss Ryder, my governess, represents them. She is sixty, and her father was an English bishop."

At this reply the lorgnettes were switched on Désirée.

The girl was very beautiful and very rich, and it was obvious that the prince was most *épris*. Money was badly needed to repair their fallen fortunes, and at last it seemed as if he were prepared to swallow it, presented in this palatable form. Of course the Countess de Mailly was not quite the same as other French girls of good birth. She had twenty-one years of blindness behind

her, during which, according to all reports, she had been left entirely to servants, utterly neglected by her guardian; in fact she was only just beginning to read and write. So naturally it was not so very surprising if she could not quite distinguish the difference between this English person with the queer name and a French aristocrat.

"As an old school companion of your mother's, my dear young friend, I must tell you——" the princess began.

What she was going to say was not finished. Another visitor was announced—a bachelor on the far side of forty, who claimed acquaintance on the score of having known Désirée's father.

Occasionally when well-placed fortune-hunters were there Wilson would come in for tea. It was a refined form of torture to him, to give Désirée a chance of really measuring him side by side with the suave, polished, elegant men of her own class.

But she did not always give him the opportunity.

Sometimes when she was standing watching him as he moved, calm and unflurried, among a host of workpeople, the sound of carriage wheels or the hoot of a motor would bring her even closer to his side.

"Mr. Wilson, hide me. There are some people coming to see me, and I don't want to see them."

She would seize his arm and hurry with him into the deep shadows of an olive grove, or the depths of some dark pine wood, and make him sit down beside her, hidden in the shade of the trees.

The carriage would stop. A few minutes later Pierre's old voice would come calling:

"Mademoiselle! Mademoiselle!"

But Désirée's hands were already over her ears.

"I don't hear anybody calling, do you, Mr. Wilson?" she would question, looking the incarnation of mischief.

Then Wilson had to unbend and smile back at her.

Whilst Miss Ryder gave tea or chocolate to undesired visitors, Désirée remained hidden at some distance with the man of her choice. And he would stretch himself beside her, giving himself up to the joy of the moment.

Occasionally, when his eyes wandered from the girl, it would seem that a fly crawled in his ear, a fly that refused to go at the first or even the second hit, and perhaps a third brought a suppressed gurgle of delight which told him the tormentor was a blade of grass in Désirée's hand.

Forgetting the gulf between them, he would grab at the small, teasing hand, and hold it for a moment quivering in his, then let it go suddenly. For all at once he would remember her position and his poverty, and that she could be a real princess if she wanted. The princeling simply haunted the house; hardly a day passed without his coming, bringing the girl gifts, or wanting to take her somewhere.

Then the grass would tickle no more. Instead, Désirée would sit bolt upright beside her steward, wondering why he could not see what she was trying to show him.

When her visitors said disparaging things, or looked in a disapproving manner at her idol, with an effort she kept herself from flaring up at them, from telling them what she thought of them and him. But most of all she wanted to lay her head on his shoulder and weep because they could not see how wonderful he was; to tell him what they had said, and how it hurt her; to hear him laugh in his pleasant, kindly manner at all these people

and their petty ways, he, a man so infinitely their superior, to hear him say:

"I don't care a hang what they say, Désirée, so long as you love me."

But she could not do any such thing. He held himself so aloof, as if he were really the god that, in her darkness, she had thought him—aloof, yet unfailingly kind and helpful and considerate.

Sometimes it needed a terrible effort not to throw herself on his hard strength as he lay stretched out on the ground beside her. She wanted to have his arms around her again, holding her safe and secure, crushed so close against him that it seemed they were one.

It never occurred to Wilson to consider that Désirée did not take any of her men visitors gathering fruit with her, that she did not run off with them and hide in the woods, and then sit demure and sedate at their sides, tickling their ears with grass.

But what was not obvious to Wilson very soon became obvious to the outside world. To all other men, Désirée was "The Ice Maiden," cold and scornful, not even condescending to pour out their tea or chocolate when they came to see her, letting her governess officiate at the tea-table.

With thoughtful eyes she watched her new friends.

In past days, when she was living at the château, these smart mothers had not brought their sons, these middle-aged bachelors had not remembered they were friends of her father. No one had come to see her when she really needed a friend; no one—except Mr. Wilson. He was the only one who had come then with gifts and invitations.

When entertaining in her own drawing-room Désirée

was always the princess, cold, haughty, and imperious, unless Wilson chanced to appear.

Then she was no longer a ruler, but a slave girl.

Miss Ryder was not allowed to pour out *his* tea. Désirée did that herself. And she carried it to him, and from the array of dainties fetched what she knew he liked the best.

The difference was so marked, the preference so obvious, that the titled and aristocratic set that now claimed the girl as one of themselves soon began to talk.

The talk came to a head one day at a reception in Nice. The real princess was there, spiteful and malignant because the princeling had been refused. In a corner she and various other fashionable mothers were talking, their gaze fixed on Désirée, who was sitting close by.

"If I had to say who the Countess de Mailly favors, I should say she is guilty of the bad taste of being in love with her own steward," the princess's well-bred, malicious voice remarked.

Désirée heard what was said, and, what was more, she knew she was intended to hear.

In a sudden gust of anger at the falseness, hypocrisy, and flattery around her, she got up quickly, and faced the gossipers in the corner.

"Mr. Wilson was my friend when I most needed one," she said. "He helped me when I was poor and blind. He did not wait until I had sight and riches. I was as much the daughter of your old school friend then as now, but you could not remember it until I had £10,000 a year. And now you sneer at my preference!"

Before anyone had recovered sufficiently to make any reply, she turned and went quickly from the room, to seek a refuge in the splendid motor-car which Wilson had

selected for her, to be driven home by the smart chauffeur he had engaged.

As the days passed and Wilson still remained unresponsive, in spite of all the timid advances she made, her heart grew cold and heavy, and the soft little voice no longer sang about the old house.

Perhaps he did not love her? Perhaps he was only doing what he considered his duty, in a cold, hard, English way, and had come back to help her because she was so helpless?

Then one day it seemed to Désirée that she had a reason for his silence.

A letter came from Mrs. Green, and among various items was one that ran:

"I have just heard that your friend, John Wilson, is ruined. That must have been why he left Nice in such a hurry, before you were really better. The moment he got back to England he set about selling his business. A few weeks ago it was sold for about £200,000, and he has taken a post abroad. Nobody knows where he has gone. He has burnt his bridges behind him. I thought you would like to know this, because you were wondering why he had left Nice before you were quite cured. He is a proud man, who would clear out if he were hard hit, and according to rumor he had not a penny left. No one knows how he came to grief, but the fact remains that he has."

In her letters to Mrs. Green Désirée had never mentioned that Wilson had come back to her as her steward. He had gone away from her once, and she was afraid he might go again if he learned that she had guessed his real identity.

She read the paragraph through again and again, and then sat staring at it thoughtfully.

How had he been ruined, this man who had come into her life with £10,000 a year, who had vanished, after performing miracles, and reappeared, shorn of his riches, too poor and too proud—so she gathered from Mrs. Green's letter—to ask the woman he loved to marry him?

All day Désirée carried the problem about with her, brooding on it silently.

When Mr. Wilson came into her life he had £10,000 a year and she had nothing. Now she had the money and he was penniless. He had sold his business for £200,000. "The Necklace of Tears" had been sold for that amount—so he had said.

It suddenly dawned on Désirée that she had never asked him to whom he had sold her heirloom. She had been only too glad to get rid of it, lest misfortune should fall on her idol. And misfortune had fallen on him, despite her efforts.

The necklace had never been mentioned since he had come back into her life. It was connected with her uncle and cousin, people she tried not to think about.

Désirée found herself thinking about them now.

They had wanted the necklace. Almost from the day of her birth her uncle had schemed and planned to get it, condemning her to years of darkness for the sake of its evil, glittering stones, pretending to her it was of no real value. Mr. Wilson had saved, not only the necklace, but what to her was infinitely more precious—the honor of her name.

Looking at the matter calmly, in the light of wider wisdom, it did not seem possible that her uncle and cousin would let the necklace go lightly. Had the scheming and plotting gone on after it had left her pos-

session? In the end had they succeeded in stealing it from Mr. Wilson?

Why had he gone back to England so unexpectedly? That afternoon in the nursing home the news of his departure had fallen on her with the suddenness of a thunderbolt.

She remembered the tension under which he had been laboring. Since that day she had learned that, the night before his going, her uncle and cousin had left Nice in a motor-boat and had been drowned off Toulon. No one had been able to find out why they had gone out in a small boat on a dark night, but it proved to her that they wanted to get away quickly and quietly and without anyone knowing where they had gone.

Had they somehow managed to steal the necklace from Mr. Wilson? Had they been drowned in running away with it? Had he ruined himself to pay a debt of honor—to her, who wanted nothing from him but love? And now he was poor, so poor and so proud that he dared not ask for what was his own.

The thought thrilled her. It was all in keeping with her estimate of his character.

But they might go on for months, years even, like this, unless someone took the matter firmly in hand. If he was afraid to speak, then she must not be. Not now—not when she had the key to his silence.

The thought set her heart trembling.

It was hard, cruel, that she should have to ask for the man she wanted, she who spent her days in avoiding offers she did not want. But their weeks together showed he was not going to say anything. Without actual words she could not show him more plainly than she had already done that he might lay his suit before her.

CHAPTER X

A DREAM THAT CAME TRUE

That night, when Désirée dressed for dinner, she put on a frock which in the ordinary way she would have considered too elaborate for a meal *en famille;* one, moreover, that had not seen daylight since Wilson's return—the pink silk frock with the white swansdown that she had worn on the night before her operation.

The sight of her in it, under the soft green shade of the loquat-tree, caused a spasm of pain to pass over Wilson's face.

What dreams he had dreamt that night when he had first seen her in a frock for which he had paid, when he had clasped that accursed "Necklace of Tears" about her throat, and wrapped her in a cloak of ermine—beautiful dreams which those two villains and his own carelessness had swept away.

During dinner he was unusually silent, brooding on what he had lost.

And Désirée had never seemed more desirable, more lovely, more bright-eyed and radiant, like one who had just inherited a vast fortune.

All through dinner he watched her anxiously, a tortured look in his eyes.

Perhaps she had made up her mind to marry the prince. If she did he would have to go. He could not stay if she were married to another man. That would be agony past all bearing.

The meal went through its course steadily. When coffee arrived the lamp came, turning the green shadows into gold.

Beyond the terrace day had melted into night—a gilded evening that turned softly into silver as the moon gathered strength, flooding the world with white light. In the reservoirs frogs croaked loudly. A myriad of tiny lamps about the trees and shrubs, the fireflies hung and darted. A light breeze, faintly sweet with orange blossom, made the leaves overhead sigh gently. The mountains that ringed the paradise loomed like clouds against the milky sky, where the moon soared, a half globe of flaming silver. There were no trees, only shadows that sighed vaguely. No valleys, only deeper depths of indigo where nightingales sang.

As Wilson stirred his coffee his gaze was on the soft, blurred, scented scene.

How he loved it all—the peace and the beauty—this land that was Désirée's. To live there always with her as his wife, this girl who was so decidedly part of it and him; to come between her and a rough-and-tumble world; to work hard on her estate and make a model place of it; to hand it on, perfected, to their children! A mad dream that he in his conceit had once dared to dream.

A voice broke into his broodings.

"Often I have sat here in the dark, wondering what the world was made of," it said.

"And what have you found it made of, Countess?" he asked, a hungry gleam in his eyes as he watched her.

"I've found that it is personality that counts, not the person; that it doesn't matter what people are so long as they ring true."

Wilson's thoughts went to the princeling. What unseen treasures had a young girl's eyes discovered in that degenerate specimen?

He lapsed into silence once more.

Again her voice broke into his broodings, with a desperate "do or die" note in it.

"Mr. Wilson, to whom did you sell my necklace?"

He woke to the fact that he and Désirée were alone, that Miss Ryder had gone, and that the girl was looking at him with wide, strained eyes.

For a moment he tried to keep up the farce.

"What do you mean, Countess?" he asked, a guilty flush deepening the red of his face.

"Don't pretend you don't know. Don't pretend to be your cousin any longer. I know, I've always known, you are John Wilson."

Wilson cast one quick glance at the small face opposite him.

His fraud had been discovered, his lies found out! There was nothing left but to confess—confess and have to leave a lesser paradise, for a guilty conscience said those blue eyes were looking at him with coldness and accusation.

"I didn't sell it," he said hoarsely.

"Did—they steal it from you?" she asked breathlessly.

He had no time to invent an explanation.

In his hesitation she read the truth.

"Did you ruin yourself to pay me back the price of it?" she asked tensely.

"It was a debt of honor," he said, his voice flat.

Désirée rose from her chair, her face crimson, her eyes strained, her breast heaving.

"How dared you, how dared you do it?" she gasped.

"How dared you ruin yourself because of me? I don't want your money. I don't want anything from you except—except love."

As she said the last two words she turned quickly, running from him as she had run once before, not hiding herself in the house this time, but seeking a refuge in the garden, in the seethe of shame in which she moved, hardly knowing where she was going.

For a moment Wilson was too astounded to do anything. Then he was on his feet, following after her.

What a fool he was—always had been, for that matter, where Désirée was concerned. And his last rank piece of folly was to imagine she had not recognized him!

He thought of all the little advances she had made during the last few weeks to which he had been too stupid to respond, keeping them both on the rack, finally making her do what was wholly alien to her nature and what had left her burning with shame.

Then he remembered having read somewhere that a princess must always propose to the man she loves if that man chances to be a commoner. He would tell her that the moment he found her, as he kissed the shame from her face.

But Désirée was not so easy to find.

By the time he reached the foot of the steps there was no sign of her anywhere.

Wilson paused.

All around frogs croaked, crickets whirred, and fireflies flashed gayly. But as he stood listening he noticed that the old reservoir with the stone crocodile, where the frogs usually croaked the loudest, was silent.

By now he had learned enough of the habits of the

creatures to know that their silence portended the presence of some person.

In that direction he hurried through a maze of scented trees.

Presently a bend in the path showed Désirée standing in the moonlight, the water a silver sheet behind her.

"You make me forget myself," she flashed the moment he appeared, "you, with your cold, hard, English heart."

Wilson was no more afraid of her anger now than he had been of her tears on a former occasion. In a moment he had her in his arms, and immediately her shamed face was hidden against his shoulder.

"I don't think you'll find my heart specially cold and hard, even if it is English," he whispered.

Then he had a lot more to say into her ear, the only part of her face that was accessible.

A thin cloud veiled the moon for a few minutes. When it passed, the light revealed John Wilson and the princess of his dreams sitting on the old stone seat together. But she was not sitting sedately beside him as was her habit when she was a phantom of his own imaginings and he was a small shabby boy with the "sun and moon" in his trousers. He had found another place for her, where he had never thought of putting her in those far-off days.

She was on his knee, her head resting on his shoulder, hugging one of his hands to her breast. There was a flush of happiness on her face now, not crimson shame. He had kissed all that away as he had explained that a princess—even a fairy one—must always propose to a commoner, and that there was nothing untoward in her proceedings, but had he dreamt she was willing to take on such an ordinary sort of man, he would have let her waive her royal prerogative and done the job himself.

And now she leaned against him, smiling softly, looking at him with worshiping eyes, his hand tightly clasped.

"I want everything to be yours," she was whispering. "I don't want any money. I want to have to say, 'John, may I have another cup of coffee, or a piece of chicken, or a cigarette, or a new frock?' because it's all yours. And you to say, 'Why, my darling, yes, of course!' surprised that I should even ask you. I don't want you ever to be cross and say, 'You know you can, without worrying me about it.' I want everything to be yours—all to come from you. I want you to take back all the money for that horrid necklace. You don't owe *me* anything. I owe everything to *you*—you, who have given me light and—love."

Wilson kissed the child again and pressed her closer, praying that he might never fail her.

He had reached the land that few attain—the land where dreams come true.

THE END.